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19th Century Christian Benevolence and the Unwritten Constitution

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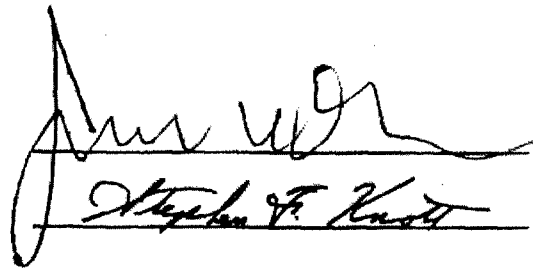
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PART I

Introduction

In recent scholarship on political foundations, the question of religion, specifically Christianity, has emerged as one of the most diverse and difficult ideas to conceptualize in terms of its unique contributions to American political development. This thesis is not an attempt to resolve to what extent specific doctrines—pre/post millennialism, Calvinism/Arminianism, etc.—consistently apply and/or motivated Christians to actively participate in the early American political experiment. Although investigation of those doctrines supplies a fruitful source for research, I am focusing on a specific organization, movement, and period in American history in the hope of discovering how the Christian worldview worked itself out in practice.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how Christians, specifically pre-Civil War evangelicals of the 19th century, viewed their role in strengthening and maintaining the unwritten constitution observed most astutely by Tocqueville. By “unwritten constitution,” I mean the fundamental mores, values, and assumptions informing society and government. Disestablishment in the post-ratification years did not produce the unwritten constitution, but it did intensify the salience of it. A new and more vigorous form of maintenance, energized at the community level, was necessary to fill the vacuum left from the collapse of the hierarchical church-state structures. In one of his most prescient observations, Tocqueville unmasked the nexus between social consensus and

political harmony and how the latter presupposes the former: "What keeps large numbers of citizens subject to the same government is much less the rational determination to remain united than the instinctive and in some sense involuntary accord that results from similarity of feeling and likeness of opinion. I cannot accept the proposition that men constitute a society simply because they recognize the same leader and obey the same laws. Society exists only when men see many things in the same way and have the same opinions about many subjects and, finally, when the same facts give rise to the same impressions and the same thoughts."¹ Christian benevolence through voluntary association emerged as the prescription of choice for balancing the demands of the unwritten constitution in an increasingly democratic political environment. The great public space made available by a limited form of national government created favorable circumstances in which non-electoral dynamics could define and shape how many 19th century Americans worked out their constitutional liberties in practice. In what became known as the Benevolent Empire, evangelicals embraced and encouraged democratic fever but sought to preempt its excesses by mobilizing thousands of citizen-servants for numerous issue-oriented causes.

This inquiry is limited to an examination of the American Bible Society (ABS). Not only was it one of the earliest, largest and most influential of all pre-Civil War benevolent associations, but it could credibly claim to be national in scope. To be sure, most benevolent organizations in the antebellum period (including the ABS) were headquartered in the North, but only a handful maintained auxiliaries throughout the

¹ Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Ed. Arthur Goldhammer. New York: The Library of America, 2004. (430-431)

southern and western regions, thus making them national in-name-only. The American Bible Society, on the other hand, is one of the best organizations to focus on because its mission of Bible distribution was widely adopted by Christians across the spectrum irrespective of creed, denomination, or region. The story of the ABS gives us insight into how evangelicals exercised their political rights and to what extent the ecumenical model filled the social/religious vacuum left in the wake of disestablishment. The ABS illustrates how religious associations attempted to remedy the democratic ills highlighted by Tocqueville. The paper will focus on the perceived need for a national Bible society, the ABS' organization and strategy, and how institutionalization pioneered a path for self-government in the democratic age.

Hypothesis and Background

Why didn't Christianity simply disappear into the political background following the disestablishment campaign of the late 18th/early 19th centuries? After all, established state churches were rather limited in the goals they sought to achieve—most wanted to advance religious conformity within the relatively narrow confines of the local community or state. A quick survey of established church-state relationships from the colonial period reveals how denominations set up strongholds in various parts of the country—Anglicans in Virginia, Congregationalists in Massachusetts, Catholics in Maryland, etc. To the extent religious authorities sought political influence, that quest was attenuated by competition from other sects and power was largely confined to parochial boundaries. One would think that with such limited goals rendered unachievable by the political practicalities of the day, Christian social influence would

have shrunk, not enlarged during the subsequent period. More specifically, what made evangelicals Christians—who were mostly marginalized under formal establishment—so influential in the 19th century? Why didn't they simply privatize their faith and pull back from the public realm? In other words, why didn't American politics become strictly secular in the aftermath of disestablishment? How could Protestant Christians, once divided among themselves over doctrinal matters, come together in far-reaching benevolent societies and attempt to impose cultural hegemony across an expanding nation? What conditions favored such a development? What were the political implications of evangelical involvement in organizations like the ABS? What, if anything, was sacrificed within evangelical Protestantism in order to have greater political influence?

Beyond the institutional arrangements and political rationale outlined in constitutional writings, the pragmatic hopes of the founding generation appear strangely utopian when we consider that liberal democracy harbors and attempts to reconcile the twin seeds of radical individualism and radical egalitarianism. Although the Founders differed greatly in terms of personal piety, religious affiliation, and doctrinal orthodoxy, most recognized the tangible benefits derived from a self-restrained citizenry.² James Madison, as the key architect of the federal institutional design, is particularly important because he believed competition between factions and sects over a wide geographic area

² For example, in his Farewell Address, George Washington said: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and cherish them...And let us caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion...reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

was a solid protection for political and religious liberty of all varieties.³ But like all the Founders, Madison lived in a time where state-supported European models provided the context for the Founders' views on the subject. As a result, religion's place in the American system was limited by what they and their forebears witnessed under the formal establishments of the Old and New Worlds. While some may have advocated more government backing than others, it is unlikely the Founding Fathers foresaw how disestablishment and free association would combine in the 19th century to create an altogether new dynamic that favored conditions for the growth and influence of an evangelical benevolent empire. Yet even without this foresight, they leaned heavily on the concept of an unwritten constitution to address the unspoken assumption that virtuous citizenship was a prerequisite for liberal democracy's success. Madison was mostly concerned about correcting structural flaws in the Articles of Confederation while leaving the art of cultivating good citizenship untouched. He probably did not foresee how disestablishment and free association would combine, but he was concerned how self-government could sustain itself beyond the revolutionary generation. Madison's institutional arrangements certainly quelled the sinister ambitions of aspiring demagogues and political opportunists, but the grim prospect of an unrestrained citizenry loomed overhead as the most intractable, long-range problem to the republican experiment. Yet by leaving the question of civic virtue off the table in Philadelphia, the Founders, for all the emphasis on rational discourse and institutional checks, essentially took a collective

³ In Federalist 51, Madison elaborated on this point: "In a free government, the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights. It consists in the one case in the multiplicity of interests, and in the other, in the multiplicity of sects. The degree of security in both cases will depend on the number of interests and sects; and this may be presumed to depend on the extent of country and number of people comprehended under the same government."

leap of faith by pinning their ultimate hopes on a self-regulating populace—albeit without providing any blueprint on how to bring it about. The very omission of a roadmap for citizenship seems to suggest an atmosphere of “taken-for-grantedness”—that a centuries-old problem bedeviling classical philosophers and political thinkers alike could somehow get pushed to the side in order to address arguably secondary issues. In other words, the political experiment was less noteworthy for the institutional innovations it advanced and more radical for what it assumed to be true of, or at least possible within the citizenry as a whole. Christian benevolence provided the missing component in a Madisonian scheme that “presupposes the existence of these qualities (i.e., qualities worthy of esteem and confidence) in a higher degree than any other form.”⁴

With the state stripped of power to coerce individuals into a particular citizen mold, how could the Founders credibly design a limited constitutional regime and expect it to last? It is important to note that although the Constitution was radically different from the Articles of Confederation, the shared philosophical outlook embedded in both is seldom highlighted. Following the convention in Philadelphia, differences were expressed by the Federalists and the anti-Federalists. Yet despite their heated debates and the highly-contested state ratifications, retrospection reveals a widely-accepted commitment to governmental restraint, albeit in different degrees. The shortcomings of the Articles were mainly structural, not social in nature, so this gave the delegates tremendous leeway to focus on “merely” institutional remedies instead of the vexing and historically intractable problem of inculcating good citizenship. The unwritten constitution was so widely diffused and implicitly operative in the lives of the delegates

⁴ Madison, James. *Writings*. Ed. Jack N. Rakove. New York: The Library of America, 1999. (319)

and the people that it could be assumed *a priori* without requiring a great deal of deliberation or hand wringing—even though without it, the political experiment would collapse. Together, institutional reforms and a common social bond found synthesis in each other and resulted in near-unanimous endorsement of the new political system. Each constitution, written and unwritten, rested its claims and jurisdiction on mutually reinforcing foundations. The invocation of “nature and nature’s God” as the ultimate principle in political life necessarily limited the scope of government power. The *de facto* cultural backdrop, on the other hand, informed and legitimized American politics by defining the boundaries of American norms and values.

So from the outset, we can reasonably claim that virtue, whatever it consisted of at the time of the Constitutional Convention, was understood to have existed in a form that gave the Founders significant room to maneuver as they went about the business of devising a new governmental framework. The important thing is not that virtue was conceptualized differently by the delegates (it most certainly was), but that by placing the issue off the agenda—when it had traditionally been *the* most burning issue in regime formation—there must have been a significant level of agreement regarding the limits and possibilities of the new Constitution—agreement that found its rationale in an unwritten charter. Christianity, in all of its independent, quixotic and ubiquitous 19th century forms, supplied the social foundation underwriting the “highest law of the land.”

Having said that, however, even a cursory reading of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence reveals how consciously the Founders avoided taking dogmatic positions that perplexed and agitated many late 18th and 19th century Christians.

Our national documents have an unmistakable Enlightenment flair to them, and it would be a mistake to overemphasize the unwritten constitution at the expense of the one that emerged from a lengthy convention and even longer ratification process. It is possible to argue that the religious wars of Europe and the sectarian friction among and within the states exhausted the energies of the competing Christian denominations, thus allowing Reason to take her rightful place at the table, if not the center, of American political development. But does this explain the whole story or even the most important part of it? Much of American religious history centers on the apparent conflict among Christians and ignores some underlying agreement that made self-governance feasible. A common error is to apply the Madisonian “ambition countering ambition” maxim to matters of faith—as if to say that the American system owes its legacy to the visionary concept of quarantining religious ideals. Of course, Madison himself seems to have done just that as he elaborated on the Federalist 51 principle during the Virginia ratification debates. Religion, in this commonly accepted view, is treated as any other political faction, and religious gridlock allows an independent and rational political consensus to emerge. The assumption here is that faith is something to be restrained, subdued, or weakened through attrition.

What I am suggesting, however, is that while Enlightenment principles undoubtedly provided the impetus for American institutional arrangements, Madison also understood strict separation between religion and society would empty liberal democracy of its moral vitality. Institutional checks were designed to secure limited government and safeguard a domain for non-electoral public action. Furthermore, I am proposing that

Madison's "multiplicity of sects" construct embraces, or at least opens the possibility for reconciling two seemingly opposed ideas: sectarian conflict and sectarian cooperation. The Founders are sometimes criticized for not addressing the question of republican citizenship, but I am saying that the Madisonian framework plants important clues and tacitly affirms a type of citizenship that may best be described as personal, voluntaristic, and entrepreneurial. The onus of virtue rests on the individual and the community, not the central government. In the process of pursuing a limited political project, the Founders created space for a public sector shaped by private citizens. The Constitution is remarkable for its foresight in addressing public problems that could be solved institutionally while leaving unaddressed those questions better left for resolution by other means. By avoiding the classical dilemma of how to cultivate a virtuous citizenry, the Founders were not saying virtue was unimportant to political stability. Nor can they be charged with relegating virtue to the private sphere while the real business of regime construction was carried out by political representatives. They simply grasped that not all public problems could (or should) be solved through official state sponsorship. At a more fundamental and common sense level, communities long schooled in self-government could hardly maintain indifference on the question of public virtue, or be oblivious as to how unrestrained individualism could metastasize in the body politic.

Moreover, the development of 19th century democratization placed even greater emphasis on America's unwritten charter. The advent of the second party system, along with increased immigration and westward expansion, levied greater responsibility on the

everyday man to exercise his rights and educate his fellows in the art of self-government. As the Founders' more formal republican model gave way to democracy, virtuous citizenship gradually shifted from the background to the foreground of American political life because the forces of decentralization threatened to unravel the national unity forged in Philadelphia. Demands for greater participation and public accountability chipped away at republican institutional barriers, thus moving government closer to the people and its passions. Democracy was to become a permanent feature of American politics, but to prevent it from devolving into demagogic form, mass voluntary mobilization would have to be marshaled in the service of virtuous citizenship to prevent political-cultural vertigo. Many civic-oriented Christians rallied around a decidedly Protestant conception of virtue intended to direct how and for what purpose Americans exercised their growing liberties.

Absent the coercive mechanism of formal religion, the search for adherents degenerated into a denominational scramble. Benevolent societies emerged as America's first para-church organizations and were designed to circumvent sectarian strife for the purpose of finding common ground among Protestants. Agreement centered on the infallibility of the Bible and the genius of the American system of government. Whereas formal church-state systems had produced clear winners and losers in the religious conflicts of the 18th century, the "age of Jefferson" removed state patronage from consideration and elevated individual consent as the standard *par excellence* in American religious life. Religious diversity was only celebrated in America, and many Christians believed this stemmed from the form of government they lived under; consequently,

benevolent societies joined in the work of regime maintenance to secure religious and political blessings for posterity. Brought on by disestablishment and buoyed by the energy from the Second Great Awakening, ecumenical Protestantism jettisoned the artificial barriers of the church-state structures and forged unique possibilities for preserving the interconnectedness between faith and federalism.

The American Bible Society (ABS) and its benevolent allies spearheaded this effort and concerned themselves with the classical problem of traditional republican government—the development of human character and virtue. Like the classical thinkers, evangelicals believed rights did not exist independent from outside restraints but were fulfilled in the context of the larger community. The challenge facing evangelicals in their task to inculcate biblical citizen virtue was a daunting one given the historic obstacles and assumptions posited by political philosophers. Great western thinkers usually asserted public virtue was possible only under the following constraints: small regime, homogenous population, limitation on material gratification, and restriction on the free expression of ideas.⁵ Yet in a political environment patterned after Madison's factional model—an institutional arrangement conspicuously silent on the issue of citizen virtue—the nation's westward expansion, booming immigrant population, and burgeoning industrial wealth placed significant pressure on private citizens to find remedies for the very thing the Founders acknowledged the Republic could not live without. Evangelicals filled the "virtue vacuum" and sought to use the Protestant press, voluntarism, and ecumenism to impose their version of democratic citizenship on the

⁵ Ceaser, James W. *Liberal Democracy and Political Science*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. (10)

American public. Liberal democracy in the 19th century was culturally formless due to disestablishment, democratization and geographical expansion, and evangelicals sought to construct an institutional edifice that would vindicate as well as stabilize the synthesis of individual rights with majoritarianism.

That is one reason why the evangelical united front⁶ can be seen as a modernizing force in society. Evangelicals of the Jeffersonian era embraced the democratic individualism of the day but blended it into a religious, communitarian ethic. Whereas religion in the European church-state model required state sponsorship, evangelical voluntarism demonstrated American Protestantism functioned best by attenuating doctrinal peculiarities and funneling individual zeal toward specific, tangible outcomes. Madison's "multiplicity of sects" theory assumed old antagonisms and denominational differences would prevent any sect from gaining ascendancy over others. He had good reason to think division, not unity, was Christianity's natural corollary because Protestant history from the Reformation forward showed how difficult it was to promote agreement. American evangelicalism of the 19th century, however, sought to reconcile the conflict-ridden worldview. On one hand, personal conversion and interpretation of Scripture—ideas underscored by the First and Second Great Awakenings—seemed to suggest a type of faith radically atomistic in its focus on the individual. This individualism tacitly embraced the notion that religion was a matter of private belief, too sacred to be sullied by official state recognition or formal patronage. Sidestepping engagement in public life may have helped insulate personal faith from an encroaching secular state, but on the

⁶ See Charles I. Foster. *An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1960. Foster coined the term "evangelical united front."

other hand, it diminished Christianity's influence on the wider culture. Moreover, the American experience was distinctive in the sense that the waning of religious establishments coincided with the rise of Protestant ecumenism and entrepreneurship. Faced with immigration and westward expansion, the benevolent movement should not be understood simply as an expression of haphazard goodwill among evangelicals but as a unified response to perceived threats to faith and freedom. And although previously marginalized evangelicals had reason to celebrate disestablishment, they realized that civic life uninformed by religious truth could invite an altogether different type of problem—public apathy and compartmentalization of faith. Consequently, evangelicals were more than willing to capitalize on the high-risk, high-reward free market brought into the religious realm by disestablishment. Madison felt disestablishment would circumscribe any baneful effects from religion, but evangelicals asserted that Christian voluntarism would infuse cultural lifeblood into the Republic and produce citizens worthy of the audacious claim to self-government.

The American Bible Society in particular, and the evangelical united front in general, attempted to promote sustainable self-government and check the forces of secularism in America—not secularism in the sense of non-sectarian, republican government but secularism as an overarching and all-encompassing framework for social and political life. Secularism in this sense means an environment in which religious ideas, institutions, and interpretations have lost their social significance.⁷ It was exactly this potential outcome in liberal democracy that evangelicals sought to avoid. The ABS

⁷ This definition of secularization and its consequences is provided by present-day Christian apologist, Ravi Zacharias, in his defense of the Christian worldview. See his website at <www.rzim.org> This description also works in a 19th century context.

and its benevolent allies believed that a society made up of narcissistic individuals would lose any sense of shame once secularism became socially ascendant and widely accepted. They were apprehensive that this strain of individualism opens the door to a form of cultural pluralism which, if divorced from any notion of Christian principle, takes its position as the guiding principle for public life—a development that would render virtually all conceptions of the public good as equally valid. Though evangelicals differed greatly in doctrinal matters, none would have rejected the pursuit of objective truth, nor would they have recoiled over the thought that moral judgments made some choices irreconcilable. In the end, the ABS feared that privatized faith would be the only form of religious expression compatible with liberal democracy. They felt that privatized faith on the socio-political level signaled a loss of meaning where no moral consensus directs the public mind and individuals would simply do “what is right in their own eyes.” Evangelicals of the benevolent societies could embrace liberal democracy at the outset of the 19th century because it harnessed American Protestantism’s moral energy in multifaceted, innovative, and synergistic ways instead of being aimed toward one another in divisive denominational disputes. They saw an opportunity to blend responsible individualism with a decidedly Protestant form of communitarianism. Essentially, I am asserting that the evangelical entrepreneurial spirit, embodied in the American Bible Society, provided the cultural substance to make the Founders’ vision of liberal democracy a practical, not merely theoretical, possibility. With this as a working framework for analyzing the ABS, we can begin to see why it was so important for evangelicals of the antebellum period to build their own institutions—if for no other

reason than to reinforce the importance of religious ideas in the public square. The

ABS' widespread appeal was motivated out of a sense that cooperation among sects was the only way for Christian interpretations of all varieties to steer liberal democracy clear from the hazards of moral relativism.

PART II

Need for a National Bible Society

Local Bible societies emerged at the turn of the 19th century, but they were limited in scope and mostly confined to the eastern seaboard of the United States. In keeping with the democratic sensibilities of the day, Bible societies generally focused on their own localities or regions, but no national effort had been pursued in America until 1814. The rationale for forming a national Bible society was aptly articulated by a correspondent for the *Panoplist and Missionary Magazine*. In the article, the author highlights how complacency was beginning to creep into Christian circles, thus threatening the character of a nation growing in terms of population and geography. Lethargy in Bible distribution among Protestant Christians had to be addressed through integrated action. But action on a merely local scale was unable to keep up with the profound social changes facing the entire nation, and small societies tended to have myopic views of the problem. And despite the established presence of some robust societies throughout New England, distribution efforts were largely isolated from one another. Strong evidence indicated that even in Puritan strongholds, many households were deprived of the Bible. That percentage was only expected to grow, as there was no movement afoot to equal the dual challenges of moral erosion and westward expansion. Advocates for a national Bible society viewed cost-effective Bible printing and integrated distribution as a way of embracing modernity while holding on to the timeless truths of

scripture. Moreover, enthusiasts for the new organization made little distinction between spiritual renewal and social improvement.

If we add to this account the western and southern sections of the country, the evil becomes still more alarming. There are fewer religious institutions, fewer ministers of the Gospel, fewer copies of the Bible than among ourselves. In some of the territories annexed to the United States, religious instruction is a thing unknown; and very few, certainly not one third of the inhabitants, are possessed of the Scriptures... Their [local Bible societies] exertions, though so far successful as to give encouragement for more comprehensive schemes of benevolence, have not been proportionate to the evil, which is to be removed. The moral state of society has become more and more corrupt; and, in many instances, intemperance, neglect of the Sabbath, profaneness, and other kindred sins, have marked whole communities with wretchedness and infamy. Nor can it be reasonably expected, that these minor associations will greatly extend their influence. They are not constituted for great efforts, and are most useful in a narrow sphere...⁸

If moral depravity was the cancer, national Bible distribution was the cure. By pooling resources and effort, moral erosion would be replaced through piety, and westward expansion could be managed through dutiful administration and oversight by a nationwide institution.

Other benefits were sure to flow from a national organization using a more businesslike approach to Bible distribution. Among these were shared communications between auxiliaries and the parent institution, improved logistics, and a national reputation that would capture the attention and aspirations of Christians across the country. They hoped that by building a national Bible society, momentum would be infectious and lead to large-scale spiritual and cultural reform. Social change, however, depended directly on the degree to which spiritual renewal took hold in individual lives, meaning that a truly sanctified person would act in a way consistent with the self-evident

⁸ "General Bible Society." *The Panoplist, and Missionary Magazine*. Mar. 1814: 10, 3. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 3 Apr. 2006
<<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb>>

truths of scripture. These evangelicals believed there was a direct relationship between Bible ownership and American culture; placing the sacred text in the hands of each person would yield a spiritual and social bonanza. Bible possession implied thoughtful meditation and outward manifestation of the change wrought inwardly by the Holy Spirit.⁹ In other words, belief and action were two sides of the same coin. The emphasis on Bible distribution was intended to bridge the perceived gap between private faith and public expression, while offering volunteers a tangible way to exercise their faith for the good of God and country.

By May 1816, representatives from twenty-eight of the most prominent Bible societies agreed to meet in New York City to discuss the prospect of forming a national institution. Lyman Beecher was one of the attendees and noted the spiritual dynamics of the meeting:

It was a sublime spectacle when the Convention met. Each one had his own mind prepared by an agency which he had scarcely recognized, and of whose ubiquitous influence he had no knowledge. We came to the meeting in great weakness, humility, and prayer, feeling the difficulties in combining all denominations...our fears were not realized, and our hopes were surpassed exceedingly abundantly, so cordial was our unity. When the vote was put that it was expedient at that time to organize an American Bible Society, there was a moment of exulting, grateful, prayerful silence.¹⁰

Beecher's account underscores the pressures facing the country's evangelical leadership. Undoubtedly, their ecumenism was grounded in a sincere desire to place the Bible in the hands of as many people as possible, but like other benevolent societies of this era, the

⁹ See the letter by Rev. S. H. Tyng, D.D. "Bible Destitution, a Reason for increased Circulation." *History of the American Bible Society*. (468) He writes, "God gave it (Bible) to man, and man has not the right to take it from him. God has given man the right to read it, to understand it, and to apply it."

¹⁰ Strickland, W.P. *History of the American Bible Society*. New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1856. (26); Lyman Beecher furnished Strickland with this account in his "Memorandum respecting the Causes which prepared the Way for the establishment of the American Bible Society."

meeting also illustrates the broad recognition that changing circumstances had eclipsed the denominations' capacity to deal with them in an independent, parochial fashion.¹¹ Immigration, urbanization, and expansion forced evangelicals to rethink the way they viewed and engaged in benevolent work. But American Protestants had good reason to believe the new organization would rise to the task despite the risks involved. After all, the model of the British and Foreign Bible Society, founded in 1804, had proven benevolent work could flourish in an environment free from sectarian strife and petty bickering over non-essential matters.¹² Elias Boudinot, the first president of the American Bible Society (ABS) and revolutionary patriot, anticipated future obstacles but remained convinced the formation of the national organization was supernaturally-inspired: "I am so convinced that the whole of this business is the work of God himself, by his Holy Spirit, that even hoping against hope, I am encouraged to press on through good report and evil report, to accomplish his will on earth as it is in heaven."¹³

Organization and Strategy

Delegates to the New York convention next hammered out a constitution outlining the goals and administration of the ABS. The constitution is remarkably simple in its demands, with the two main requirements being that the Bibles produced and disseminated would be without note or comment and after supplying local communities with the sacred text, auxiliaries would forward surplus revenues or donations to the

¹¹ 1st Annual Report (52) cites the 5th Report of the New Hampshire Bible Society which describes the isolated efforts of local societies as "disjointed and inefficacious."

¹² Ibid. 1st Annual Report, in its manifesto *To the People of the United States*, states how the British Foreign and Bible Society "demonstrates to Christians of every country what they cannot do by insulated zeal; and what they can do by cooperation." One page later, they write "Concentrated action is powerful action."

¹³ Ibid. (38)

parent organization for use as stipulated by the board of managers.¹⁴ The ABS goal was not to supplant the auxiliaries but to augment them with direct assistance such as stereotype plates and Bibles produced at the lowest price possible.¹⁵ As a not-for-profit enterprise, the American Bible Society's constitution placed a premium on establishing good faith with the local societies by welcoming transparency in financial transactions and making the organization accountable to a broad cross-section of lay members and clergy representing the larger Protestant evangelical denominations.¹⁶ The administrative workload was carried out by a board of managers consisting of thirty-six laymen who served on a rotating basis. These laymen had the power to appoint the officers of the society (one president, twenty-five vice presidents, three secretaries, a treasurer, assistant treasurer, and standing committees on publication, finance, agencies, anniversaries, versions, legacies, and auditing).¹⁷ Additionally, the laymen were in charge of the day-to-day details of running the organization. They maintained correspondence with the auxiliaries, allocated funds and books, and oversaw publication at the home office, all to reduce redundancy and provide steady customer support throughout the year.¹⁸ As a repository for the leftover income from the auxiliaries, the ABS would be able to maximize Bible production and serve as a clearinghouse for the nation's Bible needs.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1st Annual Report, Constitution (Art. I,III).

¹⁵ Ibid. (11) The cost of Bibles to societies that did not contribute to the ABS were 5% above the printing cost---to pay for wear and tear on stereotype plate, binding, etc. Societies that donated received books at 5% less than the production cost.

¹⁶ Ibid, (49-50). "The society, from the commencement, has used the most scrupulous economy in husbanding all it resources for the purpose of multiplying copies of the Word of Life. It has no permanent funds, and desires to have none. Whatever is received by donation, legacy, or otherwise, is immediately converted into Bibles and Testaments, and put in circulation. All the managers and officers, with the exception of those who devote their exclusive time in the service of the society, such as the Corresponding Secretary, General Secretaries, and General Agent, perform their duties gratuitously."

¹⁷ Strickland, (35-36)

¹⁸ 32nd Annual Report, (97)

Moreover, through annual reports, the ABS generated enthusiasm and goodwill with the auxiliaries because individual volunteers could see how their contributions and societies fit into the grand scheme.¹⁹ The annual reports added synergy to the Bible movement in the United States, making the sum of the contributions greater than the ministries of isolated organizations and individuals. Any success experienced by the national organization would be equally valued by the member societies, for the long-term solvency of the ABS directly depended on support at the grassroots level. Yet perhaps most importantly, the ABS constitution carefully avoided any hint of sectarian strife that would have inevitably threatened the character of the institution.²⁰ In doing so, the advocates for the ABS won over many skeptics at the 1816 meeting and prevented schisms from undermining Protestant harmony.

Mutual trust resulted in the addition of eighty-four auxiliaries in the first year alone, and a donated expense budget of over \$20,000.²¹ Auxiliaries really were the linchpin to the Bible distribution effort in the United States, serving not only as the eyes and ears of the New York office, but also its hands and mouth. Along with raising money for the national office²² and meeting the needs of local constituencies, they were charged with deepening the Bible roots of neighboring communities through the recruitment and planting of new associations auxiliary to themselves. These efforts were intended to homogenize Christian life by “uniting all classes of the community, from the

¹⁹ 1st Annual Report, (41-42) The Philadelphia Bible Society expressed optimism that through the annual reports, local societies could learn from the parent and become more efficient and influential in their effort.

²⁰ Ibid, (55). Increasingly, Protestants were “looking beyond the sphere of their own particular interests.”

²¹ Ibid, (57)

²² 3rd Annual Report, (82) Auxiliaries supplied the patronage and the promotion for the national society.

highest to the lowest, as coworkers in the same labour of love.”²³ Efficiency in distribution, however, required accurate communication between the auxiliaries and New York office. Local societies would canvass Bible possession in their respective areas, develop tactics and strategies,²⁴ petition for assistance, and transmit encouraging anecdotes--while the home office, through its robust publishing apparatus, could raise nationwide awareness and match means to ends.²⁵ Efficiencies of scale enabled the ABS to produce Bibles cheaply, and the institution made national Bible distribution more feasible by taking full advantage of 19th century industrial and technological improvements in transportation and shipping.²⁶ In fact, New York was chosen as the home office because it was fast becoming the nation’s communications hub with the advent of canals and steamboats: “The constant intercourse maintained between a great metropolis, like New-York, with other ports, and with the interior of the country in every direction, supplies opportunities, at every season of the year, of conveying Bibles, with cheapness, security, and expedition, to the most distant places. And when to these propitious circumstances is added the comparative difference of expense in conducting an establishment on a large and on a contracted scale, in the purchase of materials, the cost of labor, and the superior execution of the work, the Managers feel warranted in the belief, that Bibles, issued from the general Depository of this Society, can be afforded at

²³ Ibid, (20-21). Females were one of the key groups the ABS reached out to, encouraging ladies’ Bible societies wherever practicable. Females were seen as particularly effective in carrying out missions of charity and benevolence. (82) Also see 28th Annual Report, (95), The Bible transcends all class distinctions and is applicable to the entire spectrum of human conditions.

²⁴ 18th Annual Report, (11) The ABS, in this annual report, published the Washington County (Ohio) Bible Society’s instruction to local volunteers. The instructions were simple, straightforward, systematic, and strategic: sell rather than give away books, explain why the effort was being made, solicit donations and subscriptions, keep accurate accountability, and relay stories of interest.

²⁵ 3rd Annual Report, (74)

²⁶ 4th Annual Report, (11-12)

a much lower rate, in proportion to their quality, than from any other source.”²⁷ Those low costs were achievable because of the capital investments into new printing technologies like stereotype plates. The ABS was well aware that initial start-up costs would be swallowed up by the demand generated from the auxiliaries. In Aug 1816 the board of managers purchased three sets of stereotype plates for \$4000 and after the first year of use, produced 10,000 Bibles. After the third year, ABS ramped up production to over 70,000 volumes thanks to additional sets of stereotype plates for printing whole Bibles and New Testaments.²⁸ These innovations and capital investments allowed the ABS to become a major book publisher in just a few short years. The success of centralized printing led to the idea that consolidated planning and management could best be carried out by the home office, thus linking together the disparate and independent actions of local societies. It is worth noting that the ABS originally considered decentralizing its printing apparatus, but by 1823 the decision was made to bring operations back to the New York office.²⁹ Like any efficient organization, efforts were made to facilitate clear communication, check redundancy, and increase responsiveness to customer needs; a single home office, responsible for all operations and administration, was considered the best way to steer the national movement.

Importantly, Bibles were typically sold, not handed out indiscriminately.

Although “gratuitous” donations were made as needed, volunteers were encouraged to

²⁷ Ibid, (8). Also see David Paul Nord. “The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835.” *Journalism Monographs*. 88 (May 1984): 14.

²⁸ Nord, David Paul. “The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835.” *Journalism Monographs*. 88 (May 1984): 7-9.

²⁹ Ibid, (15). For example, the ABS lent a set of stereotype plates to the Kentucky Bible Society with the idea of having regional printing nodes.

sell as many books as possible so as to increase the value of the Bible through ownership, thus dignifying the recipient's self-respect. A report from the New Jersey Bible Society summed it up well: "'It is *more* blessed,' said our Divine Teacher, 'to *give* than to *receive*.' While the former *ennobles*, the latter often *depresses* the mind. Whether the principle be denominated *self-respect* or *pride*, its influence on many has led them to decline taking as a *gift* that sacred volume which they did not possess, and which, from peculiar circumstances, they were not able themselves to purchase."³⁰ When folks wanted the Bible but could not afford to purchase one, prices could be reduced or an installment plan arranged. In this way, wealthy benefactors would be much more inclined to donate to the ABS because their philanthropy encouraged self-reliance, while free Bibles were reserved for society's neediest people.

In the first 40 years of its existence, the ABS printed and distributed over ten million copies of the Bible and New Testaments.³¹ Dissemination extended "from Maine to Georgia, and from the Atlantic to the Mississippi," and the effectiveness of the ABS is all the more remarkable in terms of the diversity of those on the receiving end of the benevolence. William P. Strickland, in his 1856 book *The History of the American Bible Society*, remarked:

Through its faithful allies, the auxiliaries, the society has sent the Bible into every nook and corner of our land. It has circulated it in every state and territory, in every county, and city, and village. In the Sabbath school and common school, in the college and seminary; in the hotel and asylum, and hospital and prison; among

³⁰ 3rd Annual Report, (101), 4th Annual Report, (106, 110-111, 115, 131)

³¹ Strickland, (74). Not all these Bibles would have been distributed domestically; the ABS was heavily involved in supplying foreign needs through missionaries and foreign Bible societies. Strickland states that by the 33rd anniversary, roughly five million books had been dispensed throughout the states and territories. (296).

soldiers, and sailors, and slaves; on sea, and on land, at home and abroad, every where has it, in its beneficence, sent the Gospel of salvation.³²

The American Bible Society went out of its way to assist those who were marginalized or overlooked by mainstream society. New arrivals from Europe or native Indian tribes could count on the ABS to provide them Bibles in their native tongues. Prison chaplains were gratuitously supplied with Bibles in an effort to reform criminals and teach them how to reenter society as honest and obedient citizens. Even the slave controversies of the 19th century did not dissuade the ABS from acknowledging their plight and need for the scriptures, although the compromise rendered in an 1845 ABS circular is noteworthy for its clear intention to maintain national solidarity among Protestants by not pushing the issue too far.³³ The Bible's ubiquitous presence among all classes and ethnicities extended well beyond church auditoriums and spilled over into the broader culture as an agent of assimilation and a tangible source of social cohesion. The challenge facing the ABS was how to harness the energy and potential of the Bible movement so ensure its influence was not short-lived.

Institutionalization

The ABS was concerned with establishing firm biblical foundations for the nation, and volunteers recognized the long-term nature of the project³⁴ as well as the benefits that would likely come from working with other benevolent societies. One of

³² Ibid, (74).

³³ 3rd Annual Report, (88) The Lexington (Virginia) Bible Society urged masters to equip their literate slaves with the Bible so that "they would perish not for lack of knowledge." Literacy was the threshold used by the ABS to determine whether or not an individual should receive a book. In case one wonders whether this was a veiled attempt to single out the slave population, societies would refuse Bibles to others unable to read---see the Annual Report from the Marine Bible Society, Charleston S.C, where illiterate sailors were denied the Scriptures. (108)

³⁴ 3rd Annual Report, (96) "The operation of moral causes is slow, but it is sure."

these was the American Sunday School Union. By 1831 the board of managers passed a resolution stating: "The managers view with great satisfaction the efforts of the present day to encourage the study of the sacred Scriptures in Sunday schools; and that they shall always feel disposed, so far as able, to aid such schools, of every religious denomination, by furnishing on sale at reduced prices, or gratuitously (through their respective unions), such Bibles and Testaments as may be needed."³⁵ By 1836, the board of managers sought to provide every literate fifteen year old in the country with either a Bible or a Testament.³⁶ In supplying Sabbath schools with the Bible, they hoped to inculcate American youth with enduring truths that would profoundly influence their lives. Auxiliaries distributed Bibles in concert with local Sunday school unions with the understanding that the ABS would meet shortfalls when demand exceeded the ability to pay. Evangelicals of all stripes bought discounted books or made requests for free donations, and the home office supplied the needs indiscriminately. Through its central publishing house in New York, the ABS provided Bibles cheaply, and this strengthened the organization's position and prestige among the many national and local benevolent societies spanning the country. Some within the organization viewed the ABS as a patriarch for American benevolent work, the source from which all other Christian charity, like the Sunday school movement, received inspiration and direction. The ABS was "like the sun in the planetary system, round which the planets revolve in order and constancy...If the centrifugal force is away from the Bible, they go out from their orbits,

³⁵ Strickland, (105). Excerpted from the 1831 Annual Report.

³⁶ Ibid, (106). Excerpted from the 1836 Annual Report.

and dash against each other. But so long as this force is kept in order, every thing will work aright."³⁷

The American Bible Society also worked with the American Tract Society (ATS) in a mutually beneficial way, but that partnership highlighted the vicissitudes of the benevolent empire. In 1829 the ABS boldly decided to supply every family in the United States with a copy of the Bible in two years. Once word reached the auxiliaries, the movement swelled with new zeal and commitment, and an estimated half million people received the Bible for the first time.³⁸ Because the ABS relied exclusively on the auxiliaries for financial support and distribution, its influence could be just as easily handicapped by complacency. The frenetic pace of Bible distribution in the early 1830's was followed by a letdown, and the ABS subsequently faced a new challenge in motivating its volunteer base for continued vigor. Growing lethargy dampened enthusiasm through the early 1840's, causing the board of managers to voice concern that the Bible movement was becoming sterile. Less demand and decreased correspondence from some of the branches seemed to validate the suspicion that certain localities had lost their momentum and that new societies were not expanding with western growth. Out of a desire to meet the Bible needs of places lacking local societies as well as to rejuvenate

³⁷ 25th Annual Report, (76-77), Strickland, (301-302) The American Bible Society clearly viewed the organization as the gold standard among benevolent societies, and possibly the purest in terms of its non-denominational outlook and influence. "We have the American Sunday School Union, the American Tract Society, American Education Society, American and Foreign Christian Union, American Colonization Society, and the American and Foreign Bible Society; but all know that these various societies, however catholic their name or benevolent their objects, are more or less under the influence and control of particular denominations...while the American Bible Society takes in its broad, catholic sweep every church, and all sections of our own and foreign countries. It has formed an alliance with none, and yet claims an alliance and brotherhood with all Christian sects, denominations, and societies which aim at the elevation and salvation of man."

³⁸ Ibid, (111).

nonproductive auxiliaries, the board moved to supply colporteurs from the American Tract Society with Bibles as they navigated through the vast hinterlands of the West. "The committee now find that, in places where there are no Bible auxiliaries, the distributions by tract colporteurs have been timely and useful, and in some instances, where the auxiliaries had become torpid, the call on them for Bibles had led them to a new activity in their work."³⁹ The board did not want to aggravate tensions with the auxiliaries it depended on, but its clear goal through collaboration with the ATS was to introduce competition into the Bible distribution system in the hope that stagnant auxiliaries would rise to their responsibilities.

Like other benevolent movements of the era, the ABS discovered that one of its greatest challenges was in institutionalizing the charisma of the Second Great Awakening in order to give the evangelical movement lasting influence on American culture. Regular money flow into ABS coffers was particularly problematic because it varied irregularly. The Long Island Bible Society framed the problem by stating, "Serious disadvantages are felt, and much is lost to the cause itself for want of a plan (of operation). It is indeed a matter of deep regret that in the aid actually furnished this cause, so little of it seems to flow from a sense of obligation, or to be the fruit and evidence of settled principle, and so much to depend on occasional excitement."⁴⁰ But if local societies established annual objectives for donations and distributions, the national budget would be buoyed by greater fiscal predictability and systematization. Some

³⁹ Ibid, (115). See also 31st Annual Report, (212-214) Cooperation with ATS tract colporteurs was established to jumpstart defunct auxiliaries and to reach out to those families adjacent to the colporteurs' routes but physically isolated from any local Bible society.

⁴⁰ 18th Annual Report, (74)

societies, like the one from Long Island, incorporated these principles into its procedures, but because the national organization's power was largely persuasive, it could not force other auxiliaries to follow the same example. This limitation undoubtedly hampered complete institutionalization, but the nature of benevolent work tended to induce voluntary imitation when ideas were successfully employed. Often, the ABS would publish facts or commentaries valuing steady loyalty over sporadic displays of zeal. The board of managers wanted to induce greater regularity into ABS operations, knowing that immigration and rising birth rates demanded long-range planning and committed partnerships. The ABS would never outlive its usefulness because each generation had to be schooled in the "revelations of the Word of God to guide and control them in the mighty whirl of human progress."⁴¹

In addition to alliances forged with other benevolent enterprises, the American Bible Society developed an agency system intended to help the parent organization make sound fiscal decisions and to keep the auxiliaries sharp and engaged in the ministry. The ABS had known about an agency system for quite some time; even as early as 1820;⁴² the idea of paid, full-time employees gained the attention of some within the organization. The British and Foreign Bible Society had made remarkable progress in Europe and elsewhere through the committed efforts of Bible missionaries. But in the United States, agents were not utilized systematically until the 1830's and 1840's because the ABS felt

⁴¹ Strickland, (299). One estimate claimed the American population was growing at a clip of 33% every ten years, meaning that the ABS could not afford to relax its distribution efforts. Aside from the US growth rate, global demand cautioned against lethargy. In both cases, the appeal was intended to lift the horizons of volunteers beyond parochial concerns and aspire toward national or international goals.

⁴² 4th Annual Report, (24)

the job of stirring up enthusiasm fell squarely on the shoulders of the subsidiaries.⁴³

As operations expanded with western growth, the New York office sometimes had difficulty knowing if certain auxiliaries were still solvent because communication had been one-sided, and the board of managers was oblivious to the condition in the field.⁴⁴ The board envisioned agents as the ideal solution for long-term viability.⁴⁵

Once an ABS agent arrived on station, he would take a financial inventory of the local branch.⁴⁶ It was not uncommon for these societies to have outstanding debt to the parent organization, and agents often discovered that enthusiasm for the Bible mission waned because a group of volunteers had become demoralized over the inability to repay the balance. Agents came to realize that debt could be just as debilitating as apathy, so they would audit the financials and determine to what extent the ABS should forgive some or all the amount owed for previous grants of books. Next, an agent would help local volunteers develop customized plans for systematic re-supply of Bibles in their communities. If the agent traveled to an area lacking an auxiliary, he arranged for a public meeting and outlined the important goals, advantages, and duties of joining the national association. Finally, the agent would make specific appeals to the society's

⁴³ Ibid, (27)

⁴⁴ 18th Annual Report, (83) The Missouri Auxiliary Bible Society, for instance, asked the ABS to send a permanent agent who could coordinate the Bible cause in various parts of the state due to widespread inactivity and debt.

⁴⁵ 34th Annual Report, (23) "New societies will not be formed, funds will not be collected, nor the work of exploration and supply prosecuted to any adequate extent, or in any way equal to the wants of the country and the cause, without the influence of active, enterprising agents."

⁴⁶ 18th Annual Report, (15) A good example of a dutiful ABS agent was Mr. Philo Wright of Ohio who was dispatched to Michigan to conduct a "*reexamination and supply*." In one month alone, he traveled about 500 miles, revived two auxiliaries, formed an additional two, settled debts, and raised nearly \$100.

leadership,⁴⁷ emphasizing that success or failure depended on their personal commitment to the cause. Agents were counseled: "Aim, wherever you go, to give a *permanency* to all auxiliaries—to make them feel that they are to act from year to year. The want of our own growing population will never cease...No society must think of relaxing its efforts until the *world* is supplied with the Bible. Try to impress this truth *deeply* on every auxiliary."⁴⁸

The board of managers realized the ABS needed greater consistency in its distribution efforts, but total reliance on an ad hoc auxiliary system could not prevent fluctuations from year to year or achieve homogeneity between regions. To maintain and expand its influence, the ABS designed a plan that divided the nation into separate districts (comprised of at least one state) and employed full-time agents who strove to infuse predictability and uniformity among auxiliaries.⁴⁹ In some cases, as in Georgia, agents were able to streamline the operations of disparate local societies by helping form state organizations charged with coordinating the regional Bible effort. The increased responsibility affected the Georgia Bible cause by "lengthen[ing] our cords, and strengthen[ing] our stakes."⁵⁰ In other places, like Missouri, an agent's oversight induced renewed vigor and entrepreneurship. One year after making a request for an ABS agent

⁴⁷ 26th Annual Report, (80) Agents were never intended to replace auxiliaries. They were, however, part of the larger mission to reconnect key local leaders with representatives from the home office. Through personal appeals, the ABS hoped to ensure the solvency of the auxiliary system.

⁴⁸ Strickland, (313)

⁴⁹ Ibid, (313-314). By 1856, the ABS employed thirty-one full-time agents and two temporary agents. An additional two full-time agents were paid for by auxiliary societies. (315). Additionally, agents were never intended to supersede the auxiliaries---see 35th Annual Report (25-26)

⁵⁰ 19th Annual Report, (88) The Augusta Bible Society was a *de facto* leader in the Georgia Bible cause, and it recognized that a state organization would achieve unity of effort throughout the state. "Through the medium of a state society, more full and accurate reports of the progress and wants of the Bible cause amongst us could be collected, and communicated to the American Bible Society."

(and eventually procuring one), Missourians challenged themselves to give every new immigrant a Bible or Testament.⁵¹ Such changes in various regions of the country testify to the influence and skill of committed agents in the field. The ABS paid for their services, and in the process, attained a greater degree of nationalization than would have been otherwise possible.⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid, (82-83)

⁵² 32nd Annual Report, (30-31) The decision to pay individuals a salary for their services is one of the most credible evidences that the ABS wanted to institutionalize its operations. By 1848, the board of managers had even encouraged auxiliaries to employ Bible distributors, specifically when coverage was lacking in areas of new exploration. See also 34th Annual Report, (69) for more on paid distributors.

PART III

Cultural Hegemony and Regime Maintenance

Institutionalization was not carried out for its own sake but as demonstrable proof that limited government can function and be maintained over time through strenuous volunteer efforts. Needless to say, to the extent governmental power was circumscribed by institutions such as the ABS, those very organizations conversely expected windfalls of socio-cultural capital for shaping American mores and habits. This national influence, brought about through institutionalization, reminded the ABS that its power could only continue under the circumstances that allowed it to grow, thus explaining why “Bible distribution” and “self-government” become almost interchangeable terms in ABS jargon. With each annual report, the ABS reinforced the idea that personal piety was meaningless without outward manifestation of one’s commitment to Christian benevolence and the Bible movement *writ large*. Most importantly, Bible distribution was pursued as part of a larger culture-building enterprise to check the feared ascent of moral relativism and establish a normative status quo upon American society. Democracy threatened to make every man an island unto himself, but the work of “world construction” demanded conscientious effort to produce an external, objective reality for all to Americans to tacitly recognize and submit to. Sociologist Peter L. Berger writes, “The fundamental coerciveness of society lies not in its machineries of social control, but

in its power to constitute and to impose itself as reality.”⁵³ The institutionalization of the ABS was visionary and although not everyone subscribed to their designs, evangelical benevolence nevertheless captured the attention of the nation and even won begrudging respect from antagonists for its capacity to sway people. Like Tocqueville evangelical Christians understood and anticipated the power of public opinion in democratic times. The Frenchman astutely observed how religiously-informed public opinion saturated American life:

In the United States, the majority takes it upon itself to provide individuals with a range of ready-made opinions and thus relieves them of the obligation to form their own. People there adopt a large number of theories in philosophy, morality, and politics without examination, on faith in the public at large. Indeed, if one looks into the matter closely, it becomes apparent that religion itself reigns there far less as revealed doctrine than as common opinion.⁵⁴

Years later Orestes Brownson, the famed New England intellectual and activist, witnessed the power of the religious zeal that had seemingly taken over the country. Lamenting the “radical tendency” of the evangelical benevolent empire, he criticized the movement for its profound consequence on independent thought: “A factitious public opinion grows up, becomes supreme, to which whoever wishes for some consideration in the community in which he lives must offer incense, and which he must presume on no occasion to contradict.” By virtue of bringing Protestants of all types under the umbrella of Bible distribution, evangelicals synergistically wielded more cultural power than their competitors, even if they did not constitute a national majority. Brownson continues,

⁵³ Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1967. (12) “World construction” and “objectivities”, according to Berger, come about when “institutions, roles, and identities exist as objectively real phenomena in the social world, though they and this world are at the same time nothing but human productions.”

⁵⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. (491-492)

“The majority of the people, indeed, may not be represented by this opinion—may, it is true, not approve it; but they are isolated one from another, minding their own affairs, and ignorant of their numbers and strength; while the few, by their union, mutual acquaintance, concert, and clamor, are able to silence any single voice not raised in adulation of their idol.”⁵⁵

To be sure, ecumenism came at a cost unforeseen during the benevolent empire’s halcyon days as the institutionalization of the ABS was both strong and weak. It was strong in the sense that it prepared the ground for shaping American public opinion, but because it could only speak of theology in broad generalities, institutionalization stripped evangelicals of an interpretive authority for how to implement biblical principles in public life. Stated another way, the process of institutionalization was carried out in such a way that the ABS leadership was left mostly with a secular political vocabulary to galvanize inter-denominational support for the sacred work of Bible distribution. A Protestant heavyweight emerged but one oddly characterized by cultural muscle and theological flaccidity. Denominationalism may have decreased among evangelicals, but political enthusiasm quickly filled the void under the aegis of forging a Bible culture. Armed with a slogan derived from Protestantism’s lowest common denominator—“No creed but the Bible”—it is as if the language of moral republicanism became a surrogate for traditional debates over baptism, predestination, and a whole host of vexing doctrinal particulars. Language on the “here and now” gradually obfuscated thorny logjams on theological issues so as to expand the common ground between Christian sects. Berger

⁵⁵ “An Oration Delivered Before the Authorities of the City of Boston in the Tremont Temple.” *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*. Oct. 1846: 3, 4. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 13 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>>

observes that Protestantism unwittingly undercut itself because it “narrowed man’s relationship to the sacred to the one exceedingly narrow channel that it called God’s word (*sola gratia*)...It needed only the cutting of this one narrow channel of mediation, though, to open the floodgates of secularization.”⁵⁶ With the Bible regarded as the undisputed source of national cohesion, Protestantism encountered few threats to the culture-building enterprise. But men like Brownson foresaw how the benevolent empire paved the way for the secularization of public life due to its preoccupation with the new and relevant:

We have, to a great extent, ceased to regard any thing as sacred or venerable; we spurn what is old; war against what is fixed; and labor to set all religious, domestic, and social institutions afloat on the wild and tumultuous sea of speculation and experiment. Nothing has hitherto gone right; nothing has been achieved that is worth retaining; and man and Providence have thus far done nothing but committed one continued series of blunders. All things are to be reconstructed; the world is to be recast, and by our own wisdom and strength. We must borrow no light from the past, adopt none of its maxims, and take no data from its experience.⁵⁷

If the Bible’s legitimacy were ever called into serious question by a large segment of the people, the edifice the ABS had worked to institutionalize would crumble under the weight of its inability to advance some kind of interpretive authority that fostered reverence for the sacred.

Moreover, self-censorship in areas of doctrine and biblical interpretation, though crucial for constructing an evangelical consensus, did not silence discussion on social or cultural matters or curtail the ABS’ institutional need to express itself in other ways,

⁵⁶ Berger. *The Sacred Canopy*. (111-112)

⁵⁷ “An Oration Delivered Before the Authorities of the City of Boston in the Tremont Temple.” *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*. Oct. 1846: 3, 4. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 13 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>>

mostly through implied or explicit political commentaries. The relatively simple and straightforward mission statement to distribute the Bible to as many people as possible proved insufficient to the task of securing the long-term conditions in which Christianity could flourish in the United States. The rhetoric suggests a larger project to create and maintain a decidedly Protestant evangelical culture where Christianity served as the undisputed axis on which the American worldview turned. Said differently, political rhetoric was a way of “sayin’ it without sayin’ it”—a bone fide evangelical roll call that reassured fellow ABS members of the common good desired by all, even though by doing so, religious objectives were sometimes conflated into political ones. Politics supplied evangelicals with reasonable metrics to gauge whether biblical tenets were adhered to. So long as Bible distribution seemed to coincide with the inexorable rise of moral republicanism, evangelicals of all stripes could take satisfaction from knowing that barebones religious dogma was not inconsistent with exerting maximum influence on society and culture. They could celebrate liberal democracy’s secular form provided individualism was subsumed under a broadly-defined, decidedly-Protestant cultural hegemony where Christian benevolence provided personal and community life with purpose and meaning.

Efforts to bring greater efficiency to Bible distribution and promote an evangelical social consensus did not mean the ABS neglected its individual volunteers. While nationalization and institutionalization were intended to portray Bible distribution as a mass democratic movement (which it undoubtedly was), it placed a premium on individual competence, intelligence, and activism. Bible distribution may have become

more systematic, but it would not run on auto-pilot, so the ABS reiterated the importance of personal contribution and sacrifice for the ABS' aggregate success. Through its actions, the ABS provided a political antidote and assumed the role Tocqueville identified as essential if America was to develop into a genuine liberal democracy instead of devolving into either a hard or soft despotism. If "self-interest properly understood" requires citizens who eschew democracy's tendencies toward selfishness, isolation and impotence, the ABS sought to do just that by creating a system wherein motivated Christians carried out religiously-inspired public service that bolstered overall civic-mindedness. Exhortations went out to volunteers to be proactive in their missionary work, and auxiliaries were reminded how easily the infrastructure could collapse without sustained zeal at the local level.

What are all the religious and benevolent institutions of the age, but combinations of individual efforts? What is this great national Society, but the union of its numerous auxiliaries? And what are many of these auxiliaries themselves, but a consolidation of little district associations which noiselessly pursue their way, perhaps unnoticed and unknown beyond their own immediate neighbourhoods, but whose combined influence is felt to the remotest verge of christendom.⁵⁸

Personal appropriation implied the active, not passive, participation of the individual in the ABS world-building venture.⁵⁹ This explains to a significant degree why the ABS and other benevolent organizations embraced democracy—because by enlisting the support of the everyday layman, the culture project could be promoted as volitional and a function of grassroots activism. Unless "internalization" took hold at the individual level,

⁵⁸ 25th Annual Report, (80)

⁵⁹ Berger. *The Sacred Canopy*. (16-18) "Internalization, then, implies that the objective facticity of the social world becomes a subjective facticity as well. The individual encounters the institutions as *data* of the objective world outside himself, but they are now *data* of his own consciousness as well. The institutional programs set up by society are subjectively real as attitudes, motives and life projects. The reality of the institutions is appropriated by the individual along with his roles and his identity."

the culture building project could not endure or remain plausible over time. Like doctors possessing lifesaving medicine, ABS volunteers were reminded that they too were once dead in their sins, and it was incumbent upon them to share the spiritual panacea with neighbors. The key was not simply to supply the demand; after all, volunteers believed human depravity blinded men to their need. Evangelicals had to create the demand for the Bible. The groundwork would have likely involved door-to-door visitation, follow-up dialogue, and proselytization, all of which demanded time, effort, and even personal hardship.

The numerous ABS calls for re-supplying districts can be seen as an attempt to 'remind' evangelicals of the most important things—what Berger calls pretheoretical knowledge⁶⁰—while giving them an opportunity to influence future generations of Americans in the never-ending work of culture maintenance. Such effort “diffuses that feeling of kindred and fraternity which is the cement and the glory of human society.”⁶¹ Tapping into evangelical piety, the American Bible Society conceptualized its corps of volunteers as agents of cultural, as well as spiritual, reform—acting as superintendent over the American liberal democratic regime.⁶² The 25th annual report elaborated on the point:

⁶⁰ Ibid, (21) Berger writes, “Most socially objectivated ‘knowledge’ is pretheoretical. It consists of interpretive schemas, moral maxims and collections of traditional wisdom that the man in the street frequently shares with the theoreticians.”

⁶¹ Ibid, (82)

⁶² Ceaser, James W. *Liberal Democracy and Political Science*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. (20) Ceaser underscores the importance of an active and competent citizenry in regime maintenance, highlighting the false notion that liberal democracy is self-perpetuating: “It involves...establishing secondary political and social institutions that promote helpful habits and practices; and devising intellectual and cultural strategies to foster supportive ideas, opinions, and beliefs. The task of superintendence cannot be fully institutionalized or written into a constitution or set of laws. It is a variable enterprise that requires an ongoing adjustment and readaptation of secondary institutions and of intellectual

It moreover rarely happens that a zeal for the circulation of the Scriptures can exist, without its giving an impulse to other efforts for the moral and religious improvement of the community around us; and accordingly a district well supplied with the Bible will not often be found without schools, and churches; there intemperance and profanity will be discouraged, the Sabbath will be revered, and the Gospel of peace will diffuse its general smiles and blessings.⁶³

Immigration and Education

Along with the sabbatarian movement, two issues in particular—immigration and education—offer some interesting insights into the mindset of 19th century evangelicals and how they sought to exercise their socio-political capital. As the United States expanded geographically and demographically, the ABS knew the cultural status quo it helped create required maintenance and ceaseless vigilance. Immigration seemed to place the American experiment at a crossroads where the idealism of representative democracy could be vindicated or its worst nightmares actualized. If political and religious liberty in American democracy depended on virtue, the ABS reasoned that biblical principles had to be widely ingrained in the nation's social fabric.⁶⁴ Who would inform these newcomers' views on morality? How would immigrants restrain their passions? And equally important, would they identify with American institutions and ideas founded on the premise of limited self-government?⁶⁵ Legislation could only

strategies in such realms as religion, art, and education. As times change, the way to promote a favorable climate for liberal democracy must also change."

⁶³ 25th Annual Report, (82)

⁶⁴ Ibid, (84)

⁶⁵ 18th Annual Report, (59). Anxiety over immigration centered on assimilation into American culture. Evangelicals understood the seismic demographic changes taking place. "Under a government of laws made and administered by men, and according to inclination of a majority, where is the hope of securing wise legislation but in the enlightening and quickening of the public conscience? And what energy, save that of the Bible, can we look to for producing an effect like this?" Also see 35th Annual Report, (115) Evangelicals clearly believed the Bible and its restraints were the only bulwarks against an encroaching, leviathan state. If immigrants were not schooled in self-government, government would have to become

address the outer layers of these questions, but it could not transform internal motivations and outlooks. For ABS volunteers, the heart of the problem lay in the very nature of man, and they viewed the Bible as the only remedy for redirecting the conscience, disciplining the habits, and training future generations in the qualities that not only brought spiritual reconciliation, but civil harmony. They did not seek immediate results from their labors, for they recognized a lasting solution required patience and resolve before those objectives were realized.

The ports of our country are open for free admission of emigrants from all parts of the earth. No jealous or watchful policy of political quarantine has ever authorized or delayed the entrance of the stranger and foreigner among us. This state of things must introduce into our midst an evil leaven, for which government can provide no antidote. For when a man steps upon our shores, he intrenches himself behind the Constitution and laws of the land, and triumphantly asserts his freedom of opinion. And if he has his mind and prejudices trained, in politics and religion, to the belief of doctrines, the adoption of which in this land would lead to the defense of the wildest agrarianism on the one hand, or the most diabolical atheism on the other, our people have no alternative but to stand by, mournfully gazing upon the work of dilapidation, or to forestall this disastrous agency by impregnating the public mind with the truth of revelation.⁶⁶

By impressing the immigrant with the biblical responsibilities that accompanied his newly acquired rights, the pitfalls of radical individualism could be circumvented and a common Christian worldview forged. And yet, in keeping with the democratic conventions of the day, the very act of placing the Bible in the hands of the new settlers was a rugged assertion of individual autonomy to interpret the scriptures for themselves

more expansive and restrictive simply to ensure a modicum of social order, but in the end, individual liberty would wane. "The chafing external restraints of severe government can only be safely removed when the salutary internal restraints which the Bible imposes are substituted."

⁶⁶ Pierce, (436).

and work out its meaning in everyday circumstances.⁶⁷ Distribution to future immigrants was so essential to the ABS that in some cases, grants to foreign Bible societies were dispersed with a stipulation that a portion be earmarked for those on their way to America. While most newcomers received Bibles upon arrival, the ABS felt preemptive delivery could be useful in preparing the immigrant for spiritual and social acculturation.⁶⁸ Evangelicalism advanced a modern notion of faith that eschewed both ecclesiastical structures and degenerative individuality. Furthermore, Bible possession prevented human nature from spiraling down toward base appetites. In the process of sifting through scriptural injunctions, the immigrant would come to fully appreciate his constitutional liberties as natural extensions of the Judeo-Christian God and not simply a social contract conceived of and manipulated by fallen men. In short, the Bible was upheld as the last line of defense against licentiousness and the only sure support for a sovereign political community.⁶⁹

Public education was another key concern that mobilized ABS leaders in the antebellum period. In both immigration and public education, however, the organization sought mostly to define the contours of the debate, confident that if the moral suppositions were established and followed, answers to specific social questions would

⁶⁷ 26th Annual Report, (90) ABS efforts to reach immigrants was similar to its overall plan for the western territories. In both cases, the Bible was considered a companion, not a crutch for the adventuresome frontiersman. "His energy, his enterprise, his fearlessness, and the independence of his mind, mark him as a worthy recipient of the sympathies and benevolence of a charitable and of a Christian people." Denying the Bible would have been an affront to the immigrant and Westerner alike.

⁶⁸ 19th Annual Report, (44-45)

⁶⁹ LL.D. Theodore Frelinghuysen. "Address of the Hon. Theodore Frelinghuysen, LL.D., President of the American Bible Society." Excerpted from *History of the American Bible Society*. (439) The president expands on the transcendent theme and how the Bible is a liberating force: "His soul expands to the thoughts of his destiny; and as he looks through the great scheme of redemption, and strives to gauge the price paid for his ransom, his free spirit swells from the chains that have bound it, and oppression, in all its forms, trembles before the demonstrations of his deliverance." See also the 34th Annual Report, (109) and how evangelicals saw the Bible as the only way to "assign limits to our progress."

generally flow logically and consistently from the premises. Consequently, the ABS was careful to avoid overt partisanship, but clearly, political penumbras always accompanied Bible distribution.⁷⁰ The goal was to “form the common mind”⁷¹ by setting the terms for public debate—a kind of meta-politics that undergirded constitutional and statutory law.⁷² With policy prescriptions distilled by the Bible, evangelicals expected political outcomes would share a broad Protestant perspective that reinforced cultural dominance.⁷³ This helps explain why the ABS attempted to saturate the market with Bibles, for although its leaders were realistic enough to understand that many people would not accept evangelical benevolence at face value, the moral energy of the movement ensured that religiously informed viewpoints were welcomed in public forums. In 1844 ABS president John Cotton Smith opined:

Although the pure and peaceful religion of the Redeemer claims from human laws neither exclusive privileges nor worldly distinctions for its votaries; and although the latter are to look for no greater immunities from a free and equal government than are allowed to all classes of its citizens, still, from their well-ordered lives and expansive benevolence, there must and will proceed a reflex influence, eminently propitious to the vital interests of the commonwealth.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ 26th Annual Report, (100) Commenting on the growing German immigrant population in the Mississippi valley, Cincinnati, and the Southwest, an ABS resolution stated, “Give them the Bible, which to many of them has been a sealed volume, and from it shall they learn how to discharge every duty which relates to time or eternity.”

⁷¹ 25th Annual Report, (86)

⁷² 26th Annual Report, (85) ABS President, John Cotton Smith, used a different phrase—“moral culture.” By this he meant, “Clear views of duty to God, and a just estimate of individual and social rights and obligations, the only sure basis of private prosperity and national greatness.”

⁷³ Breckinridge, Robert J. “The Use of the Scriptures as a Reading Book in Schools.” Excerpted from *History of the American Bible Society*. (446) “There are certain great principles, certain fundamental ideas, which always are, and necessarily must be assumed as true, and even indisputable, in every enterprise, system, and organization which can exist among men. If it were not so, all progress would be impossible; and the commonest attempts to perform the most pressing duties might lead only to contention and embarrassment.”

⁷⁴ 28th Annual Report, (85)

Using the power of its New York press, the ABS created an environment where public discourse required *de facto* recognition of Christian sentiments.⁷⁵ Moral knowledge was the prerequisite for every other kind of knowledge, and that is why many ABS supporters fought fervently for the Bible to be taught and revered in public schools. Divorcing moral education from academics threatened to compartmentalize the universality of knowledge that made the Christian worldview coherent. In an exposition of the evangelical mindset, Benjamin F. Butler, attorney general of the United States from 1833-1838, reinforced the notion that the Bible and intellectualism were not mutually exclusive but complementary with one another if placed in their proper order. Politics, economics, and science were important for any society, but they were not ends in themselves because "it has been found that vicious practices and sentiments, and much individual and social misery, might coexist with the cultivation of knowledge, with the arts of refined and elegant society."⁷⁶ Derived from a supernatural source, godly virtue anchored and gave meaning to all other secular fields of knowledge and satisfied the human longing to transcend fatalism and emptiness. Butler described the futility of those seeking a system of public morality cut off from the Bible's overarching authority:

In all this they think and act wisely; but, unfortunately, they do not wield an instrumentality powerful enough to accomplish their benevolent designs; for here, again, we have the testimony of experience, which has shown that only a small

⁷⁵ 25th Annual Report, (85) In a statement about the nature of American political and religious institutions, the ABS stated, "This undisguised and open character of ours, sir, is fostered by our popular institutions. And it helps us to know ourselves, while it helps others know us. It reveals the evils to be remedied by the application of the word of God. It reveals our dangers, and keeps the patriot and the Christian alive to the necessities of his country...Let this heavenly preservative be cast abundantly into the fountain of our political character and power, and the very agitations we undergo will promote its diffusion, and assist the moral decomposition and correction; but let the supply be increased to the measure of saturation"

⁷⁶ Hon. B.F. Butler. "The Bible the great Moral Renovator of our Race." Excerpted from *History of the American Bible Society*. (474)

portion of mankind can be induced to yield obedience to any system of morals which does not proceed from, and is not sanctioned by, a supernatural authority.⁷⁷

With a biblical "instrumentality," however, Christians were emboldened to pursue their secular vocations with open minds, confident that truth, wherever it could be found, complemented the Holy Scriptures.⁷⁸ So evangelicals were not initially hostile toward secular education or even inclined to think those subjects should be overtaken by religious dogma. Reason, as informed and guided by revelation, avoided the shortcomings of human wisdom alone and caused beauty and civilization to flourish.⁷⁹ The Bible's use in primary schools was the cornerstone upon which all other knowledge depended;⁸⁰ consequently, education void of scripture would have been analogous to building a brick house without mortar. The ABS motto for public education was sloganeered as "based on knowledge, founded in liberty, approved by conscience."⁸¹

Bible instruction in public schools served a socio-political function as well as a moral one. History had demonstrated the short life of democratic experiments, and evangelicals were mindful of the corrupting nature of power even in one devoted to

⁷⁷ Ibid., (475-476)

⁷⁸ Ibid, (475-476). Butler says the Christian "regards all the mere human instrumentalities recommended by statesmen, lovers of learning and science, economists, and moral philosophers, as inadequate, yet he does not reject any one of them. He would employ them all; but to each and to all he would superadd the Gospel of Christ." Additionally, Butler acknowledges Bible distribution is not a panacea for all social problems, per se, because poverty and suffering are part of the fallen human condition. However, the diffusion of biblical truth will help to "dry up" or ameliorate these problems.

⁷⁹ 26th Annual Report, (93) "It has been asserted that all religious feelings rest upon one of two grounds, that of *authority* or *conviction*; that the heart either bows to the one or yields to the other. That of the Bible rests on *both*. It has truth *for* reason, and truth *above* reason." See also 31st Annual Report, (87) for more on the salutary influences of the Bible on intellectual and cultural pursuits.

⁸⁰ 4th Annual Report, (38). Along with Bible teaching in primary schools, juvenile Bible associations were formed to develop godly habits in youth. The Bible "has a restraining effect on vicious habits. It is beginning life with its most honourable employment, that of doing good, and may lay the foundation of enlarged philanthropy, as well as solid piety, at a maturer age."

⁸¹ Butler, (450). Again, knowledge in this sense, is best understood as pre-theoretical knowledge as defined by Peter L. Berger (noted above).

checks and balances. They believed democracy could be calibrated through education, and the schools, as the natural repositories for knowledge, were the guardians of American self-government. Future generations had to be prepared for this task of democratic citizenship; it could not be arrived at in an instant but was a lifelong process of replacing human dross with biblical refinement and cultivation.⁸² Organizations like the ABS supplied a corrective to original constitutional defects intentionally left unaddressed by the Founders. James Ceaser writes, "A great error in interpreting *The Federalist* has been to treat it as if it were meant to provide a *comprehensive* view of the respective roles of public and private spheres in a liberal democracy."⁸³ In other words, Publius does not fully address how liberal democracy was to be maintained. And yet, liberal democracy's key elements, individual liberty and majoritarianism, mixed to create a highly flammable form of government subject to quick burnout or fragmentation. The American Bible Society brought cultural equilibrium to the political system, and it was able to do this by merging charitable work with a conception of citizenship that complemented American government and stabilized its inherent volatility. In a circular to the ABS, Rev. Robert Breckinridge echoed the Federalist 39 principle: "Our great republic, and all our free and sovereign commonwealths, have been frankly periled upon this great and lasting truth, that man is capable of self-government...If this be not true, our country is undone. If it be true, the people must nevertheless be sustained in that

⁸² See the letter by Simon Greenleaf from Cambridge University. *History of the American Bible Society*. (459). Greenleaf addresses a common viewpoint among those who would "leave them (children) to decide (the merits of Christianity) for themselves till maturity." He goes on to suggest this idea is bizarre if applied to other fields like mathematics where rote memorization and dictation prepare the mind for maturity. To neglect religious instruction in schools is to "cultivate the branches and neglect the root." Also see 28th Annual Report, (95), The Bible influence is steady but sure, not necessarily immediate.

⁸³ Ceaser, (15).

condition which we call enlightened, civilized, and free...and I solemnly insist upon this inference from that truth, that without the Bible this republic can not continue."⁸⁴

The positions taken on immigration and public education signify that ABS leaders did not think liberal democracy could operate independently from some kind of guidance. For them biblical principles supplied the type of self-regulating supervision that allowed liberal democracy to flourish, so volunteers felt no discomfort or tension between personal piety and regime maintenance. Because they were at ease with the idea that there is no artificial barrier between state and society, they could confidently assert that their work was good both for individuals and the country at large. Ceaser has pointed out that at a fundamental level there is no such distinction in liberal democracy even though its form assumes such a separation exists. The interplay between politics and culture offers insights as to what is needed to sustain it.⁸⁵ Moreover, Ceaser does not endorse capricious or routine infringement of the state-society principle but rather justifies the practice when carried out in the service of limiting the central government's power.

Provided those guidelines, we see how organizations like the ABS endowed Tocqueville with the raw material to envision such an arrangement and formulate his notion of constructing a new political science. Unless liberal democracy has clear ends in sight, justice and liberty can become mere slogans for a radical individualism that results in centralized power and intrusion into society. According to Tocqueville, if the artificial

⁸⁴ Breckinridge, (452-453). Madison wrote in Federalist 39, "It is evident that no other form would be reconcilable with the genius of the people of America; with the fundamental principles of the revolution; or with that honorable determination, which animates every votary of freedom, to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government. If the plan of the convention therefore be found to depart from the republican character, its advocates must abandon it as no longer defensible." *Writings*, (211)

⁸⁵ Ceaser. (33-34) Ceaser credits Tocqueville with grasping the importance of this reality, an underlying concept Ceaser labels as "political sociology."

line between state and society is breached by governmental initiative, power is aggrandized and a noose slowly, but inevitably, chokes off liberty. If, however, spillover emanates from the private sector and into the public realm, greater likelihood exists that the fusion of collective, private interests will better reflect the foundational mores upon which liberal democracy rests—and for Tocqueville, that is a good and useful thing. It was this check on political power that even prompted vocal opponents of evangelicalism to agree with the notion that the “government should be thankful to see its province daily reduced to a smaller and still smaller compass”—ostensibly due to the nationwide phenomenon of “disinterested” charity and its salutary effect on social and political developments.⁸⁶ Christians of all stripes assumed an unwritten charter premised on benevolence was as vital (if not more so) to the nation’s survival as the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. The American Bible Society was an important secondary institution that lifted the horizons of ordinary Americans, subsequently supplying a much-needed antidote for liberal democracy’s tendency to wallow in material self-interest and the “soft despotism” that followed in its wake.⁸⁷

In essence the American Bible Society embodied the new type of citizenship that Tocqueville described as critical for democratic times—citizenship accentuating

⁸⁶ “The Social Effects of Protestantism” *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*. Apr. 1848: 2, 2. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 13 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>> Christian benevolence, despite its decidedly Protestant character, was ubiquitous and something even Catholics shared with their antagonists, even though they claimed the Church alone possessed the institutional strength to anchor the benevolent work. The above quote was given by one, Dr. Vaughan—ostensibly an evangelical Protestant, in a letter to the *Morning Chronicle* (Sep. 10, 1847) Orestes Brownson qualified his endorsement of Dr. Vaughan’s statement above, claiming Protestant benevolence was short-lived and prove to be unstable.

⁸⁷ Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*. (816-821) On soft despotism: “The sovereign, after taking individuals one by one in his powerful hands and kneading them to his liking, reaches out to embrace society as a whole...”

individualism as understood within the context of a sovereign political community.⁸⁸

Ceaser writes:

For Tocqueville the aim of protecting the freedom of civil society from the threat of state incursion is, paradoxically, too important to be left to the simple iteration of the formal liberal principle of separation. Principles are not self-executing; they do not enforce themselves in society. Real freedom requires an actual *power* in society to resist that state and a *will* among the citizens to limit government and protect rights. This power and will do not miraculously appear as a consequence of the mere act of assertion of an abstract principle; they must be promoted.⁸⁹

The idea of limited government was not foreign to groups like the ABS; after all the evangelical mindset of the 19th century was forged on the anvil of disestablishment, and they were not about to substitute their hard-fought religious freedom for new political shackles. Their notion of citizenship sought to keep government limited in scope so that citizens, through concerted voluntary action, could mold American habits and mores without sacrificing freedom. In the end, the society's goal—at least in the socio-political context—was to impose, through democratic assent of course, a soft form of cultural hegemony in the service of regime maintenance.⁹⁰ “Self-interest well understood,” as conceptualized by the ABS, might not produce citizens of heroic virtue, but it did guide “how each person will interpret his individual interest” and in the process, elevated moral sentiment across the board—something Tocqueville recognized as an important element

⁸⁸ Ceaser, (36) “It [the formal liberal principle] asserts the primacy of rights and thus supports the autonomy of a private sphere in civil society. Yet the whole theory of individual rights is based on the recognition of the sovereignty of the community that organizes to form a government to protect these rights.”

⁸⁹ Ibid, (35).

⁹⁰ See Femia, Joseph. (1975). “Hegemony and Consciousness in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci.” *Political Studies*, 23:1, 29-48. According to Femia, Gramsci makes a distinction between intellectual and practical affirmation—the difference being that the former involves theoretical abstraction that unites him to his fellow men. Practical affirmation, on the other hand, encourages a participant to act upon what “he has inherited from the past and uncritically accepted.” Hegemony is consent when carried out as practical affirmation, and consent is essentially passive not active according to Gramsci. The ABS sought to create an unchallenged, normative social consensus on the nation, yet it relied upon individual zeal and initiative to do so.

in preserving liberal democracy. Tocqueville's observation is particularly appropriate in relation to the ABS' culture-building project and regime maintenance function:

Not only do Americans adhere to their religion out of self-interest, but they often locate the kind of self-interest that might cause a person to adhere to religion in this world rather than in the next. . . . Seeking to touch their listeners all the more effectively, they (preachers) are forever pointing out how religious beliefs foster liberty and public order, and in listening to them it is often difficult to tell whether the chief object of religion is to procure eternal happiness in the other world or well-being in this one.⁹¹

Theocratic Designs?

Cross-fertilization between religious and state institutions occurred frequently during the antebellum period; a cursory glance at ABS membership lists includes Supreme Court justices, congressmen, diplomats, civil servants and even a U.S. President (John Quincy Adams). In a twenty-fifth anniversary resolution endorsed by the ABS, the nexus is clear: "It is directly to our point to say, that the virtue which is to secure our liberty must be joined with the power that exercises it. To what purpose can it be for us, that the power of the nation be here and the virtue there? The two can avail us only in their union; where the power is there must be the virtue."⁹² Liberal individualism run amok threatened to fracture the all important community under which personal freedoms were sustained. The question then for the ABS was how replenish the life-giving source that made liberal democracy a viable alternative to any form of government preceding it.⁹³ Bible enthusiasts were keenly aware of liberal democracy's conspicuous silence on

⁹¹ Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*. (610-616)

⁹² 25th Annual Report, (84).

⁹³ Berns, Walter. *Freedom, Virtue & the First Amendment*. New York: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1957. (253). See especially chapter 10. Berns writes on the liberal tendency to neglect the issue of citizen virtue: Commenting on the first amendment, he writes "It is ironic that liberals, who argue so vehemently for free government and free speech, cut themselves off from the very means by which they can attain them and

the issue of character formation and were astute enough to present a volitional alternative to direct state intervention in the matter. Recognizing, as did Tocqueville, that a regime is measured by the type of citizens it produces, the ABS never challenged the institutional arrangements of American government, but through Bible distribution, the organization viewed its mission as remedying a void in the Constitution. ABS rhetoric of the 1840's and 1850's routinely highlighted the organization's work and responsibilities as fundamental supports for the preservation of American political institutions. One pastor wrote, "The obligation to become co-laborers in this enterprise of supplying all classes of our rapidly increasing population with the Scriptures of truth can be measured only by the value of the Bible in a government where vice tends to destroy the only life-preserving element in its structure, and virtue to nourish and perpetuate it."⁹⁴ In other words, absent a Herculean effort on the part of individual Christians to reinforce biblical values, the country and its political institutions would deteriorate under the weight of its own moral depravity. Opponents to the ABS were suspicious of evangelical church-state designs, concluding the benevolent empire's intentions were anything but benign. In several instances, hyperbolic rhetoric seemed to justify the allegations, as in an 1844 resolution adopted at the annual meeting:

It is the union of these two kindred principles, the Bible adapted to men in all circumstances of life, and the Constitution protecting the citizen in his inalienable right to worship God, as the Bible leads devotion, that so adorns with excellence, endears with blessings and invests with sacredness, the privileges and claims and possessions which compose our heritage...And unless I have widely misinterpreted the providences of God, the induction is authentic, that these grand

maintain them. They do this by denying that government may legitimately concern itself with moral education."

⁹⁴ Reverend Dr. L. Pierce. "Co-operation of the Methodist Episcopal Church South." May 20, 1846. Excerpted from *History of the American Bible Society*. (435)

principles, in their glorious connection and benignant power, are held as a solemn trust, embracing both the glory of his name and the happiness of the world, *and must be defended and preserved, by all means, and at every hazard—peaceably if we can; forcibly if we must.*⁹⁵

Universalists and Unitarians supposed that the extensive national network, in combination with the growing wealth made possible by private endowments, “evinces the existence of motives and interests, foreign to pure benevolence, and subversive of the feelings of Christian charity.”⁹⁶ They charged the ABS with sounding a false alarm regarding the alleged dearth of Bible possession and claimed the ABS used ecumenical garb to mask a stridently sectarian character which threatened to undermine the genius of the American political system. In triumphant Jeffersonian language, opponents accused the ABS of outright skullduggery: “Our government has been careful to guard against monied monopolies and oppressive aristocracies; but here is an association [ABS] which defies the vigilance of the wholesome and necessary ordinances by which we are regulated. We are on the eve of an important crisis. Our civil and religious liberties have been transmitted to us unsullied; and we are now called upon to defend them against the encroachment of ecclesiastical tyranny!”⁹⁷ Of course the ABS did not take these indictments lightly, but since the importance of the Bible itself was seldom brought into

⁹⁵ 28th Annual Report, (101)

⁹⁶ “Article 2—No Title.” *Universalist Magazine*. Mar. 1, 1828: 9, 37. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 10 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>> See also “Bible Society.” *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*. Feb. 26, 1831: 2, 9. *American Periodicals Series*, ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 10 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>> In this particular article, the author states the ABS held property in the amount of \$757,000, of which “a large proportion of this is in Bank and Insurance company stock.” The innuendo is that the sacrificial generosity of the people was being taken advantage of in order to line the pockets of the institution.

⁹⁷ “Wealthy Beggars!” *Universalist Watchman, Repository and Chronicle*. Aug. 13, 1831: 3, 16. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 10 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>>

question,⁹⁸ the ABS never faced a fundamental threat from its detractors during the first two decades of its existence. By presuming fiscal impropriety and church-state machinations, the anti-ABS arguments were framed in such a way that tacitly, though perhaps disingenuously and paradoxically, reinforced the Bible's salutary influence on public life. The attacks were directed not against Scripture *per se*, but toward the institutional transparency, or alleged lack thereof, of the American Bible Society.⁹⁹ In some ways, the anger channeled against the ABS confirmed how effective the organization was in capturing the imaginations and affections of many Americans—mostly through the power of the evangelical press. The monopoly of thought was seen as so pervasive by the early 1830's that one anti-ABS editorialist wrote:

They have presses engaged in their interests, in almost every part of the country. The immense influence of the press is too generally known to require any remarks from us; and we do consider it somewhat alarming, that so many papers are actually engaged in promoting the cause of the self-styled Orthodox, while there are so few engaged in defending the rights of the people from clerical encroachments. We do not intend to condemn the press generally as mercenary and dependant, but most of them are devoted to party politics, and any interference with 'Orthodox' encroachments would be deemed prejudicial to the interest of their party."¹⁰⁰

Given the ABS' tremendous grassroots support, opponents never went so far as to accuse the people of outright gullibility, but they were mystified by popular "indifference" to the

⁹⁸ "National Institutions" *Christian Advocate and Journal*. Apr. 18, 1828: 2, 33. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 19 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>> They differentiated "between the goodness of an object and the means used to accomplish it."

⁹⁹ "An Appeal to the Public" *Utica Evangelical Magazine*. May 17, 1828: 2, 4. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 16 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>> Opponents questioned the ongoing need for Bible distribution, claiming that the amount of money spent should have already satisfied the goal of supplying every family in American with a copy—leading to speculation that the ABS was nothing more than a "monied institution" with ulterior motives.

¹⁰⁰ "Proceedings of the Friends of Liberal Principles and Equal Rights, in Rochester." *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*. Feb. 12, 1831: 2, 7. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 18 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>>

monopolizing influence of the evangelical empire. How could the people fail to recognize that the ABS was consolidating benevolent feeling into a colossus inimical to the genius of republican institutions?¹⁰¹ Adversaries seldom asserted biblical principles were injurious to American democracy but instead claimed the ABS was an impostor masquerading as a friend. The Bible movement, though worthy of the public's devotion, had been taken over by a handful of aristocratic clerics who sought to reinstitute the formal union of church and state.¹⁰² Through their Machiavellian tactics and vast reservoirs of money and liquid assets, religious elites threatened the political liberties of all Americans.¹⁰³ For a time there was real fear that "the great monopoly in the printing business"—as wielded by the ABS, the American Tract Society, and the "Sunday School Union"—would inevitably lead to a Christian political party. According to strict separationists, temporal power had always been the benevolent empire's long-term objective; Protestant ecumenism cloaked the full unveiling of its political ambition until social control had been secured.

They have drawn the line of demarcation, and proclaimed *non-intercourse* in business against all who can not or will not come up to *their* standard, see with *their* eyes, hear with *their* ears, and worship by *their* creed. In short, sectarianism is allowed to mingle, and ambitious and party purposes are sought to be served, in

¹⁰¹ See "Original Communications." *Evangelical Magazine: Devoted to Theoretical and Practical Religion, Free Inquiry...* Aug. 15, 1829: 3, 10. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 19 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>> The editorialist opined: "The indifference manifested by community generally, to the movements and progress of the American Bible Society, is one of the most remarkable traits in the religious character of the American people. That a people proverbially jealous of their rights, and cautious of bestowing money where emolument is not expected, nor the purposes of charity to be obtained, should foster in their bosoms an institution which annually draws from them immense sums, and which menaces in its operations those very rights which are held so dear, is an anomalous and remarkable instance of indifference. We say, that this institution *menaces our civil rights*; and feel confident that we speak advisedly in making the assertion."

¹⁰² "National Institutions." "Religious institutions, especially when constituted as they are, are of dangerous tendency in a free republican government, and are wholly incompatible with our civil institutions."

¹⁰³ "Proceedings." The argument can be summed up as follows: "We can see but little difference between a clergy, backed by the power of a king and aristocracy, and a clergy sustained by immense wealth."

all their transactions and intercourse in society. They have an eye steadily fixed on the great desideratum, the union of Church and State, and every thing is made to bow before that all-momentous project. All these lesser machines are made to move in subserviancy and harmony with this mighty engine. And still the great mass of the people seem to sleep, unconscious of their approaching doom, which will be awful indeed, unless they speedily awake to avert it."¹⁰⁴

Opponents were acutely aware of the ABS' socio-political ambitions, but they were crippled in mounting a successful counteroffensive because they played by the same general rules as ABS supporters. Instead of attacking the Bible's legitimacy as a foundational support for liberal democracy, detractors could only criticize the ABS for the management style employed in carrying out Bible dissemination. To be sure, criticism did curtail some support for the organization,¹⁰⁵ but the assumption by virtually all parties was that the Bible had a constructive role to play in shaping American morality. And in a world where people generally expected much from religion and little from politics,¹⁰⁶ the ABS and its allies were able to capitalize on the perception that unreformed democracy was harmful to civil liberty. Detractors feared "amalgamation," but supporters contended that self-government was meaningless without self-restraint, and self-restraint was obtainable only through a cultural consensus anchored in biblical precepts. To the extent that anti-ABS arguments had *prima facie* validity, their main shortcoming was that they did not propose an alternative model to address 19th century

¹⁰⁴ "A Solemn Appeal to All Liberal Christians" *Utica Evangelical Magazine*. Oct. 18, 1828: 2, 15. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 18 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>>

¹⁰⁵ For example, some Baptists and Methodists removed their support for the ABS. "American Bible Society" *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*. Dec. 11, 1836: 7, 50. *American Periodicals Series*. ProQuest. University of Virginia Library. 19 Dec. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/>> Also, see the debate in the *History of the American Bible Society* by W.P. Strickland and the arguments made in "National Institutions."

¹⁰⁶ Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. (14)

democratic fears and aspirations. How does government check unrestrained individualism without enlarging the scope and power of government? Is the idea of limited government even feasible without some conception of liberal democratic citizenship? The ABS legacy endured because it was able to successfully hide its constructed nature and appear in harmony with self-evident principles (i.e., benevolence) existing since the beginning of time—or at least since the advent of Jeffersonian republicanism!

Notwithstanding their critics, evangelicals adamantly opposed formal church-state hierarchy, but their efforts in building a Protestant culture through charitable work was union of a different sort. The overwhelming evidence from the annual reports suggests the ABS firmly rejected any arrangement reminiscent of 18th century establishments, but they did view the struggle as a zero-sum game wherein the only possible outcomes were total victory or defeat. If nature abhors a vacuum, evangelicals believed it was not a matter of whether religion would be pivotal in public life but rather which religious worldview would prevail upon national norms;¹⁰⁷ it was therefore unreasonable to think formal disestablishment would be followed by nothing. Though religious coercion could “check the progress of error and of false opinions,”¹⁰⁸ it was always thought to be counterproductive to genuine faith. But through benevolence, softer but more durable forms of compulsion could be achieved from the Bible’s ubiquitous presence and

¹⁰⁷ 26th Annual Report, (93) This is why education at a young age was so important to evangelicals. “Early and constant familiarity with the Bible accomplishes this training, and nothing else will do it. If we neglect the training of the young for heaven, the prince of the power of the air trains them as his own. A process of education is constantly going on, which looks to the joy of the seraphim or the agony of the lost; which shall it be?”

¹⁰⁸ 31st Annual Report, (91)

influence over American ethics and institutions.¹⁰⁹ Formal and informal establishments mirrored one another in the sense that nominal Christianity—also referred to as the civil religion—helped congeal American society. But the advantage of the non-compulsory variant was that it placed a premium on voluntarism, which for evangelicals, provided a way to escape the inertia and lethargy of formal systems. Practically, this meant public discourse continued to reflect generic Christianity—as with the formal model—but the energy and momentum of the benevolent empire hardened or more permanently “established” the underlying supports for years to come. Formal establishments were seen as secular systems with religious garnish, but only robust informal establishments could secure eternal and temporal happiness even though this entailed the subjugation of doctrinal differences.¹¹⁰

The general success of evangelical Christians, especially during the 1820's and 1830's, can be found in how they were able to plausibly leave volunteers with the impression that “in acting out the institutional programs that have been imposed upon them, they are but realizing the deepest aspirations of their own being and putting themselves in harmony with the fundamental order of the universe.”¹¹¹ In sum the burden of proof rested with the whistleblowers to supply a reason why institutionalized

¹⁰⁹ 30th Annual Report, (87)

¹¹⁰ 30th Annual Report, (220-224) William Jay, son of John Jay, compared and contrasted the French and American republics. Despite many apparent similarities between the two nations, Jay points specifically to the decentralized nature of American religious life (and access to the Bible) as the key component of a free and prosperous nation. France, despite here religious accoutrements, was rotten from within. The emphasis of Bible distribution in the United States was to restore the inner man, believing his actions would follow in toto.

¹¹¹ Berger, (33).

benevolence was more dangerous than the specter of a great political leviathan.¹¹²

Plagued by a "vision problem," the critics during these years failed to dislodge the Protestant cultural hegemony of the antebellum period. The debate ultimately revolved around the role of biblical religion in public life and the extent to which grassroots evangelical activism could exercise power and influence within a liberal democracy.

Culture War

Cracks in the cultural hegemony began appearing in the two decades leading up to the Civil War. Continuing geographical expansion and demographic shifts undoubtedly created formidable obstacles to the evangelical consensus, but this had always been the case even from the beginning of the national Bible movement during the Era of Good Feelings. The deciding factor emerged with the advent of numerous, overtly-secular or non-Protestant challengers who disputed not only the product but the premises of evangelical mass culture. Decentralized religious life, especially in a democracy where "new-fangled theories in politics and morals"¹¹³ seemed to proliferate at blinding speed, called for greater communal vigilance and individual responsibility if the evangelicals' unwritten constitution was to hold sway in public life. One pastor wrote, "At what do all the anti-Christian organizations of the day aim, but to deprive us of the Bible, and lead us to take what they offer us in its room? The Socialists, the Fourierites, the infidels of every class, would take from me my Bible, and throw me upon passions, and appetites,

¹¹² Consider this excerpt from "National Institutions" which underscores the uphill environment opponents were faced with: "In an age like this, when the sentiment has become so popular and prevalent that the greatest amount of good may be accomplished by the union of the various denominations of Christians in their efforts to promote the cause of Christ, it is almost dangerous for an individual to dissent therefrom, unless he is willing to be denominated a sectary or bigot."

¹¹³ 31st Annual Report, (91)

and interests which nothing but the Word of God can give me power to control. And shall I abandon this sure guide and accept their proffered substitute?"¹¹⁴ Evangelicals doubted the American way of life could survive very long in that kind of environment. The idea of a secular basis for self-government was thought to be "self-seeking in all its forms, and in the end self-destruction" because it lacked an internal governor for curbing sinful appetites.¹¹⁵ In one denunciation against nonconformist philosophy, Esq. William Maxwell of Virginia sought to rally Bible advocates to defend the ABS from the increasingly belligerent and vocal attacks from would-be competitors: "We are contending with error in all its forms,---with Mormonites, Fourierites, Fanny Wrights, and a whole host of wrongites that call themselves rights."¹¹⁶ But the ABS was institutionally crippled in the sense that although it possessed an enormous press apparatus for squelching rival competition to the political-cultural status quo, it lacked the means to confront direct assaults on the Bible itself. Without a doctrinal toolbox to silence the growing cacophony, the ABS was left with little more than shrill rhetoric and empty platitudes as substitutes for genuine debate. Reinhold Niebuhr, writing in the early 20th century, made a timeless observation—one applicable to the 19th century Bible movement: "Extreme orthodoxy betrays by its very frenzy that the poison of skepticism has entered the soul of the church; for men insist most vehemently upon their certainties when their hold upon them has been shaken. Frantic orthodoxy is a method for obscuring

¹¹⁴ Rev. S. H. Tyng, D.D. "Bible Destitution, a Reason for increased Circulation." *History of the American Bible Society*. (471) Fourierism was named after Charles Fourier, a French utopian socialist who envisioned the creation of ideal societies called "phalanxes" to deal with the changes incumbent in industrial societies. These phalanxes were essentially communes set up to foster cooperation and concern among rich and poor for the purpose of redesigning society along secular lines. Casual sex was another feature of Fourierism.

¹¹⁵ 30th Annual Report, (97) See also 31st Annual Report, (94-95) on the "moral police" or the capacity to control oneself through the use of the Bible.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, (97)

doubt.”¹¹⁷ For those straddling the fence, statements like the following from Esq.

Maxwell may have de-legitimized the evangelical cultural hegemony: “Our government then is a theocracy, as truly so as was that of the Jews. God now sits above the people, and through them orders our concerns and directs our affairs. And the instrument of that guidance is the Bible he has given us.”¹¹⁸ Again, the important point here is not that the ABS or its benevolent allies actually conspired to channel soft power into some form of church-state union; it is rather to illustrate how the changing social dynamic placed Protestants squarely on the defensive and forced organizations like the ABS into damage control mode.¹¹⁹ Rather than church-state fusion, it is more accurate to say that the ABS was unquestionably devoted to moral absolutes which were to set the boundaries and order of public life.¹²⁰ The political overtones of ABS rhetoric intensified by mid-century, and although the fiery jeremiads seem sensational in retrospect, the rearguard action portended an emergence of a genuine culture war characterized by opposing conceptions of ultimate reality. ABS volunteers were called upon to fight these rival social doctrines despite the stinging setbacks, for they believed Bible distribution embodied the very essence of the cosmic struggle against sin and evil.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Does Civilization Need Religion?* New York, The MacMillan Company, 1928. (2-3)

¹¹⁸ 30th Annual Report, (98)

¹¹⁹ 31st Annual Report, (85) ABS President Theodore Frelinghuysen wrote, “Everything is now questioned, and by every body. The good old ways that men never mended are disputed or despised, and new schemes of association are put forth with a presumptuous confidence, which, if successful, would undermine all that is sacred in principle and sound morals.”

¹²⁰ Ibid, (95) “There is no fear of a union of church and state from such a cause as this. The influence of the Bible is secret and pervading. It acts not by laws and enactments, but through the silent and effective power of religious principle.”

¹²¹ 1st Annual Report. The manifesto *To the People of the United States* includes a reference to “philosophy, falsely so called...which, under the imposing schemes of reason and liberality, were attempting to seduce mankind.” In all likelihood, this was a critique of the Enlightenment period.

Professor James Davison Hunter has elaborated on the nature of culture conflict, and his insights are particularly suited for an analysis on how the American Bible Society responded to the social environment of the 1840's and 1850's. Such contests usually revolve around two major poles, the impulse toward orthodoxy and the impulse toward progressivism. Hunter writes:

The culture war emerges over fundamentally different conceptions of moral authority, over different ideas and beliefs about truth, the good, obligation to one another, the nature of community, and so on. It is, therefore, cultural conflict at its deepest level...What seems to be a myriad of self-contained cultural disputes actually amounts to a fairly comprehensive and momentous struggle to define the meaning of America—of how and on what terms will Americans live together, of what comprises the good society.¹²²

Evangelicals in the 19th century were among the first to recognize that for all the gains to be made through democracy and westward expansion, individuals ran the risk of being cut off from civilization or even worse from their perspective—rejecting the gravitational pull from the prevailing bourgeois (i.e., evangelical) worldview. Evangelicals may have been fiercely independent in religious matters, but they were worried that isolation could spark disengagement from the national culture-maintaining project. Christian benevolence addressed these concerns and linked supporters from the sparse, western frontier with the sophisticated eastern urbanites. The winners in these “cultural realignments” are conferred with the power, privilege, and capacity to determine what is legitimate and what is not. It is the power to define the meaning of America. As one of

¹²² Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: BasicBooks, 1991. (43-49).

the primary architects of American culture, the ABS wanted to maintain the privileged status of the organization and its constituents.¹²³

As in any culture war, strange bedfellows can emerge. By the early 1850's, the ABS claimed the twin pillars of popery and secular rationalism were the greatest threats to the nation's evangelical character, and despite their apparent differences, were inextricably connected through "rejection of the written Word as a sufficient rule of faith and practice, and the adoption of human reason as its supplement... They agree in declaring the Bible is not, as it stands, a sufficient rule, and hence can unite with a strong bond of sympathy in assailing the fundamental principle on which this Society is based."¹²⁴ This alliance, according to the ABS, was subtle and did not present itself as overtly hostile toward evangelicalism, but the wolf was wearing sheep's clothing and refused to play by the rules laid out by the benevolent empire. Rather than taking Protestant metaphysical assumptions at face value, the new infidels simply circumvented evangelicals through the ostensibly neutral lens of science. Outright antagonism always elicited a firm response from the ABS, but unlike the earlier Unitarian/Universalist arguments of the 1820's and 1830's that tacitly buttressed Protestant presuppositions, the mid-century hodgepodge of challengers ranged in sentiment from those wholly rejecting God's existence to seekers questioning the effectiveness of a Bible-centric public discourse. Removal of those assumptions opened up an entirely new array of political

¹²³ Ibid, (90). Although Hunter is mostly concerned with modern culture wars, his analysis is true of the 19th century benevolent societies which were the forerunners to today's religious interest groups and para-church organizations. "Most of these organizations coalesce fairly tightly around opposing ends of the new cultural axis: orthodoxy and progressivism. This means that they increasingly provide the institutional framework within which a larger cultural realignment develops—the institutional setting within which a new and larger cultural conflict takes shape." (90)

¹²⁴ 35th Annual Report, (119)

possibilities, much of which was alien to the Protestant worldview. With scientific rationalism as a competitor for social dominance, marginalization of religious viewpoints in the public square hovered ominously overhead. One ABS adherent summed up the existential stakes as follows:

And this subtle and plausible mode of attack is made in every conceivable form. It meets us in the form of science and philosophy, falsely so called. The authority of the Bible is coolly and sneeringly set aside for the crudest speculations and the boldest generalizations of a conceited sciolism, and its testimony ruled out of court, as inadmissible and inconclusive on points, where its most solemn utterances have been distinctly made. If we assert, that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, we are told that this is a question of science, and that theologians must not meddle with what lies beyond their department. If we assert that God has made of one blood all nations of men, we are told that this is a question of science, and we must abandon it to the philosopher. If we assert that God swept away the wickedness of an old world by an universal flood, we are told this is a question of science, to be abandoned to the schools. And thus, step by step, the authority of the Bible is undermined by the teachings of a pretended philosophy, whose tendency, if not its design, is to diminish and finally to destroy the claims of that Bible as a final and sufficient rule of faith and practice. Systems of social reform are eagerly and busily pushed forward, whose principles are wholly and radically unchristian, if not anti-christian in their nature...and slowly, but surely poisoning the principles of the young and unsuspecting.¹²⁵

Condescension from an elite, scholarly class was one thing, but the attempt to partition the private sphere from the public one was unthinkable and targeted the very essence of the evangelical worldview and the purpose of Bible distribution. The ABS had previously befriended education—especially primary education—as a partner in American culture-building, but secular encroachments at the higher levels seemed to sever collaboration between the two. Moreover, the ABS feared relegation to subculture

¹²⁵ Ibid, (119-120) The writer goes on to say, "But more than this, the influence is secretly reaching the Church herself. There is a tendency in many parts of it to recede from the old, high, and true views on the subject of inspiration. Theories are gaining ground, modes of reasoning and interpretation are coming in vogue, that practically nullify the authority of the Bible as an infallible arbiter, at least in all questions of doctrine."

status, and it pointed to scientific rationalism as the chief culprit in the movement to overthrow the benevolent empire's hegemony. As Richard Hofstadter has pointed out, evangelicalism focused on practical objectives like Bible distribution often at the expense of rational inquiry in doctrinal matters.¹²⁶ Religion was useful for the salutary effects it brought about but not necessarily for the coherence it established. Benevolence always implied the active consent of the people, and though often marketed as self-reliance, eventually eviscerated the movement of the requisite conceptual machinery to mount a successful counteroffensive. The rise of such ideas injected greater institutional urgency into the Bible distribution effort for the purpose of awakening lay volunteers to emergent threats on the horizon. Leveraging the power of the religious press, the ABS board of managers authorized publication of an 1854 pamphlet titled *Testimony of Distinguished Laymen to the Value of Sacred Scriptures, Particularly in their Bearing on Civil and Social Life*. In the opening preface, young men are especially encouraged to take the Bible seriously as a roadmap for life. Addressing the growing suspicion that the Bible was merely a crutch for the ignorant and unenlightened, the brochure states that many men "seem to assume that it is a book unsuited to minds in their condition, and to be read, if read at all, by those only who are sinking under the sorrows of a worn out life."¹²⁷ The acknowledgment is remarkable when contrasted with the bold ABS statements made during the formative years in which the Bible was revered as the quintessential American symbol of individualism, ingenuity, and liberty. As the antebellum period drew to a close, however, seeds of doubt crept into the public mind, inducing a retrenchment of the

¹²⁶ Hofstadter, Richard. *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1966. (83-84)

¹²⁷ 38th Annual Report, (33-34)

Bible movement. The Bible society found itself in the position of securing previous gains but no longer equipped to press the offensive in American culture-building. The ABS continued highlighting the hazards of infidel philosophies in the hope of galvanizing lethargic auxiliaries and rallying the masses against moral complacency. The home office knew its efforts had to be commensurate to, or exceed, the capacity and credibility of these alternative theories in shaping public life. For this reason, it is not surprising that ABS institutionalization efforts, especially through agents and paid distributors, coincided with perceived threats peeking over the horizon. The Bible cause became even more businesslike just before mid-century, and this may have been undertaken because volunteer efforts alone could not be entrusted to secure the evangelical juggernaut on faith and culture; further ABS institutionalization provided the necessary components to face the challenges of the coming storm with secularists. Hunter infers, "It is ultimately a struggle over the right to define the way things are and the way things should be. It is, therefore, more of a struggle to determine who is stronger, which alliance has the institutional resources capable of sustaining a particular definition of reality against the wishes of those who would project an alternate view of the world."¹²⁸ Professionalizing the workforce, though a small fraction of the overall Bible distribution effort, served notice that the ABS jealously guarded its national influence and wanted to dominate public discourse. But the switch to a defensive posture—though subtle, was inescapable—and signaled a changing of the guard, or at least an uneasy truce with secularism. In short, ideology and institutionalization mutually reinforced one another in an attempt to bolster the Bible cause in the United States.

¹²⁸ Hunter, (158)

If evangelicals felt assaulted by the growing acceptance of secular sentiments and practices, they countered that second threatening pillar, Catholicism, by wrapping their message in American folklore and symbols for the dual purpose of legitimizing evangelical culture and discrediting any Catholic alternative. By mid-century, ABS leaders defined the Bible mission as indistinguishable from the nation's historical context, ostensibly for the purpose of separating the patriots from the usurpers and to widen public approval. Speaking on the quest for independence and the early American Congress, ABS leaders opined, "In the time of the Revolution, when struggling for civil and religious liberty, they fought as Protestants; they conquered as Protestants; and as Protestants they rejoiced over their victory. At that time, then, this was a Protestant country. When, then, have we lost that character?" And on political representation, the "American Congress...was a Bible Congress; and because Washington was a Bible General; and we all know that the American soldiers were Bible soldiers; and we bless God, the American cause was a Bible cause."¹²⁹ Historical reconstruction and selective myth-telling served to caricature Catholics as somehow less patriotic than their Protestant neighbors. In so doing, organizations like the ABS provided an interpretation of the past and articulated "the precedents and ideals for the nation's future. They set out the national priorities and tasks yet to be accomplished, and they envision(ed) the mission yet to be fulfilled."¹³⁰ Anecdotes from papal countries were used to remind people that while Protestant ecumenism was natural and progressive, rapprochement with Rome was anathema to the American way of life. The 1844 annual report included a story from

¹²⁹ 28th Annual Report, (105, 107).

¹³⁰ Hunter, (55).

Bordeaux, France where a government inspector demanded that Bibles distributed by colporteurs to local school districts be immediately handed over to authorities for subsequent burning.¹³¹ The very idea of placing the Word of God into the hands of everyday laymen undermined strong notions of ecclesiastical hierarchy and elevated the importance of individual interpretation, conscience, and liberty---all seemingly at odds with 19th century Catholicism.¹³²

Of course, evangelicals could be as unbending as their Catholic counterparts, but the ABS, like other benevolent societies, thought of its work as self-evidently true not only because it pointed toward salvation but because of the tangible cultural and political benefits it carried in its wake. In a sense, the ABS doctrine was democratic dogma with an evangelical hue. Evangelicalism was so conflated with democratic euphoria that it embraced secular metrics—prosperity, the rule of law, and the spread and duration of free institutions—as the standard *par excellence* validating the ABS mission. But if those same outcomes could be secured or improved upon in other ways, Christian benevolence would come to be seen as merely one preference among many—valuable only for utilitarian reasons and disposable once better methods were devised. The major complaint against Catholicism was not animated out of doctrinal differences (after all, evangelicals themselves disagreed fiercely over many particulars of the faith), but pivoted on the extent to which “popery” supposedly retarded human advancement: “It (the Bible) is the salt that will save us, the great conservative principle; that which imparts a national conscience and morality, and will forever secure to us and to our children the blessings of

¹³¹ 28th Annual Report, (105-106)

¹³² 30th Annual Report, (92) The ABS and its Bible allies across the globe claimed they were chiefly responsible for tearing down the “iron wall” of popery in the 19th century.

a pure Protestant Christianity.” Whereas Catholicism required priests, rituals, and centralized control over parishioners, Protestants who formed the ABS believed they could circumvent these unnecessary and artificial barriers through Bible dissemination and supernatural guidance from the Holy Spirit. The evangelical movement emphasized self-control, but Catholicism embodied a form of monarchical tyranny that was thought to be several degrees worse than the dreaded church-state systems of America’s colonial past. Bible distribution was a way of proving that through volunteer action, self-government was achievable and capable of resisting enslavement to encroaching powers, whether ecclesiastical or governmental. Evangelicals rejected Catholic social doctrine because it ran counter to their ideas of rugged individualism and self-assertion; its rigid hierarchy meant that men were dependent upon a clerical class to grasp the essential truths and applications of scripture. Such dependence was unthinkable in a democratic age because it implied a spiritual handicap or inability to think and act autonomously. It is not a stretch to say that for many ABS members, Catholicism correlated with corruption and Protestantism paralleled progress. In the aftermath of the Mexican War, for instance, volunteers took advantage of the opportunity to bring the good news of scripture to a country that had been humiliated by the war’s outcome. Correspondence back to the New York home office enunciated the sentiment that Catholicism’s ubiquity had produced a culture in which the people were utterly depraved and dependent on the priestly class for moral direction. The good news, however, was that despite the war’s devastating impact to Mexico, the Catholic grip seemed to be loosening. Initial reports from ABS volunteers indicated that the time was ripe for the infusion of the gospel “as a

means of opening the eyes of the people to the abuses of the Church."¹³³ W.P.

Strickland closes the matter for ABS adherents by writing:

The universal circulation and reading of the Bible can elevate this priest-ridden land. There is nothing but the want of Bible instruction to prevent Mexico from being as free, intelligent, virtuous, and happy as our own country. It is the Bible that makes us differ. It is not the native superiority of the Anglo-Saxon over that of the Castilian—it is not that our physical resources are greater, that we have brighter skies, purer air, broader and more fertile plains, mightier rivers, or richer mines—no! It is because we have for our instruction and guide the Oracles of God, and they have nothing but the oracles of a corrupt, designing priesthood, who have usurped the place of God.¹³⁴

In other words, the ABS found a direct causal relationship between Bible possession and modern enlightenment.¹³⁵ Stated another way, many evangelicals believed there was an *inverse* relationship between the power of Rome and human progress.¹³⁶ The successful experiment of American federalism emboldened evangelicals for it seemed to validate the notion that a nation's intellectual, cultural, spiritual, and political improvement hinged on the extent to which the Bible was diffused among the citizenry. People deprived of the Bible were enslaved by ignorance and superstition, but a nation nourished by scriptural truth possessed all the wisdom necessary for self-government, freedom of conscience and genuine independence. The idea of Bible distribution in Mexico and the rest of South America had as much to do with spreading and preserving the promise of free institutions as it did with salvation.

¹³³ Strickland, (179)

¹³⁴ Ibid, (179-180)

¹³⁵ Rev. S. Olin, D.D. "Unity and Catholicity of the Bible Cause." Excerpted from *History of the American Bible Society*. (489)

¹³⁶ Rev. Dr. Bethune. "Demand for the Scriptures in Foreign Countries." Excerpted from *History of the American Bible Society*. (480) The evangelicals involved with the ABS seemed to direct the majority of their anti-Catholic rhetoric at the pope and the papal hierarchy, not the congregants themselves. Bethune writes: "They (Catholics) have their rights; if I disregard them, I teach *them* the lesson of intolerance. We want no Church and State; we ask not, nay, we spurn the aid of the magistracy in our grapple with the Man of Sin. In an atmosphere loaded with the truths of the Bible, popery can not live."

The new competition from secular philosophy and Catholicism during the 1840's and 1850's forced the ABS into a more politically active role. With the evangelical consensus undermined, the organization could not assume that mere Bible possession would leaven the loaf of public policy without more direct, hands-on guidance. No longer focused exclusively on culture-building through missionary zeal, the ABS waded more directly into the murky but turbulent political waters of the day. The explicit political rhetoric so characteristic of ABS publications in the final two decades of the antebellum period was actually an attempt to stop the bleeding brought on by the opposition and consolidate the gains from yesteryear. Those gains were largely calculated in political terms as demonstrated by numerous public appeals accentuating how the Bible movement and self-government were two sides of the same coin. For the ABS and its volunteer corps, indifference toward one signaled the imminent collapse of the other, but spirited defense on both fronts preserved the legacy of liberal democracy and religious freedom.

PART IV

Conclusion

Widespread Bible distribution, coupled with disestablishment, encouraged individuals to examine scriptural texts for themselves, stripped religious demagogues of their power to pit sects against one another, and laid the foundation for large-scale action on the religious and cultural-political fronts. John Jay, an American Founder and ABS president from 1821-1827, believed Bible possession, as promoted through the national organization, exchanged ignorance for knowledge and funneled evangelical energies in the right direction.

By the progress of civilization and useful knowledge, many individuals became better qualified to distinguish truth from error, and the diffusion of their reasonings among the people enabled them to judge and to act with less risk of committing mistakes. Since the rights of man and the just limits of authority in church and state have been more generally and clearly understood, the Church has been less disturbed by that zeal which 'is not according to knowledge,' and liberal sentiments and tolerant principles are constantly enlarging the sphere of their influence.¹³⁷

In other words, Jay believed biblical knowledge was a catalyst for modern progress and the antidote to social friction that made democratic self-government a realistic possibility. Prior to the benevolent empire, conventional wisdom assumed mutual suspicion and hostility were the common threads in American religion. In Madison's formulation, sectarian combustibility could only be avoided through federalism, disestablishment, and widespread competition among denominations. The ABS advanced the simple but

¹³⁷ John Jay. "Address of the Hon. John Jay, President of the American Bible Society" Excerpted from *History of the American Bible Society*. (408-409)

powerful idea that competition was unnatural among Protestants, and placing the Bible in the hands of the everyday man would exchange apprehension for magnanimity.

The history of the American Bible Society illustrates how a benevolent society implemented and expanded upon the vision of its forebears. The institutionalization of a movement characterized primarily by its fluctuating zeal required mechanisms for ensuring lasting influence. By combining a robust printing apparatus with financial transparency, a paid agency system, annual reports, and oversight through committees, the ABS married revivalism to modern logistics and management techniques. Nationalized Bible distribution helped establish Protestant cultural hegemony and harden American mores, but it also restricted its capacity to confront the specter of scientific rationalism in later years. When intellectual inquiry was perceived as an enemy of Christianity, the idea of evangelical institution building/maintenance eroded and the ABS succumbed to the myopia it once sought to eliminate in local Bible societies. After all, what was the point of systematizing operations at the New York office if the product line, the Bible, was perceived by a growing number of consumers as inherently flawed or insufficiently suited for modern demands? The ABS structure continued to function as before, but the cultural supports it had worked so diligently to set in place were loosening at the grassroots. Once this process was set in motion, the historic evangelical problem that organizations like the ABS tried to overcome began reemerging—privatized faith. In the heyday of the Bible movement, evangelicals prided themselves on exchanging ignorance for knowledge. With higher criticism, they increasingly found comfort in what John Jay called “zeal which is not according to knowledge.” The benevolent empire’s

strength was portrayed as a complementary blend of faith and reason, but by mid-century that alliance began splintering. Faith had largely become a leap of faith instead of the logical next step in the pursuit of knowledge. So even though the Civil War brought the benevolent age to an official close, its demise was not entirely, or even mostly, attributable to the national crisis or the post-war reconstruction dilemma. Psalm 11:3 states, "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" The American Bible Society insulated itself from intellectual examination and failed to convince skeptics that its fundamental assumptions were trustworthy or plausible. Tactical missteps, in conjunction with institutional inertia, induced the strategic paralysis that proved fatal to the Bible movement of the 19th century. Through benevolent charity, however, evangelicals did give the country a model of how religion could play a significant, if not decisive role, in shaping the national character by supplying the requisite moral energy needed to support a liberal democratic system. That is their most important legacy and it helps us appreciate the type of political science needed for the American form of government.

If Tocqueville's new political science requires thinkers well-versed in the art of keeping liberal democracy viable, the evangelicals of the early period provide a glimpse into how that complex blueprint is brought to fruition. When we consider that the same generation of evangelicals fought to eliminate the threat to individual liberty posed by state churches but also worked through benevolent association to check its radical excesses, it becomes difficult to pigeonhole evangelicals as simply another competing interest group clamoring for power in a pluralistic society. Indeed, we see how

evangelicals worked to implement in practice what the new political scientist conceives in theory. Without the cultural raw material provided by America's religiously-inspired public sector, Tocqueville's dream of reconciling democracy's combustible elements effuses into the political ether. Christian benevolence was a natural ally to liberal democracy because it instructed the American people in the mental habits required for self-government. Bible distribution was a straightforward concept to grasp, yet it was this very simplicity that made the American Bible Society invaluable in the age of mass democratization. The political importance of the ABS can be measured in how it moved people to act beyond individual self-interest and cultivated an American model of citizenship hostile toward democratic fatalism and grounded in the art of Christian charitable association. The ABS' role was critical because it provided a moral anchor for American democracy, sometimes acting as a check on excesses, other times cheerleading modern social advancement and human liberty.

Most importantly, the ABS reinforced the unwritten constitution that allowed the 19th century form of decentralized democracy to take root and flourish. The results of Christian benevolence, though important, were less essential than the way in which they were brought about. The ABS and the benevolent movement were the religious incarnation of Francis Bacon's Common Sense philosophy in which truth was discovered in a decidedly *a posteriori* fashion.¹³⁸ It was based on an appeal to the everyday man and

¹³⁸ Marsden, George M. "Everyone One's Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth Century America." *The Bible in America*. Ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982. (82-85) Timothy Dwight, president of Yale and early leader of the Second Great Awakening, wrote: "Common Sense, the most valuable faculty (if I may call it such) of man, finds all its premises either in revelation, or in facts; adopts arguments, only of the *a posteriori* kind; extends its reasonings through a few steps only; derives its illustrations from familiar sources; discriminates, only where there is a real difference; and admits conclusions, only where it can see their connexion with the

posited that all reasonable individuals, if blessed with a modicum of intelligence, would recognize that truth was common at all times and in all cultural contexts. Thus, Common Sense philosophy—though really an “anti-philosophy”—would seem to check any notion of radical individualism that may have been embedded in pure liberalism because it reflected grassroots sensibility. Nineteenth-century Protestant America was an era in which many thought German intellectualism, following on the heels of the radical French Revolution, threatened to extinguish the possibilities for democratic self-governance due to the speculative and abstract nature of those political projects. The hope was that through inductive reasoning accessible by all men, the possibility for such abuses could be mitigated by the people themselves. Moreover, if the American regime’s legitimacy stems from informed public sentiment, liberal democracy is best protected when moving from effects to causes because those sentiments reflect the real work of democratic self-government and are less prone to radical alteration. James Ceaser writes, “It leaves more space in society to the exercise of the mental habits conducive to liberal democracy and maximizes the citizens’ capacity to reason on matters under their competence.”¹³⁹ Stated another way, there is less danger stemming from ideas grounded in the real world than by theoretical abstractions imposed from the ivory tower, thus explaining why Tocqueville was fearful of deductive reasoning in the form of top-down intellectual rationalism.¹⁴⁰

premises. At theoretical philosophy, it laughs. Theoretical divinity it detests. To this faculty the Scriptures are almost universally addressed...Our Savior treats every subject in the direct manner of Common Sense...”

¹³⁹ Ceaser, *Liberal Democracy*. (166)

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, see all of chapter 7. Ceaser calls this top-down form an “intellectualocracy.”

Evangelicals soon discovered that the sufficiency of “the Bible alone” as the cornerstone for a culture-building enterprise proved to be *prima facie* untenable—as attested by the actions of evangelicals themselves by invoking Common Sense scientific corroboration of evangelical truth claims.¹⁴¹ They needed an external source of authority to neutralize 19th century evangelicalism’s inherent subjectivity. Evangelicals believed that science would back up the broad outline of Scripture, thus making the moral imperatives found within the sacred volume obligatory, not merely optional. Implicit in this hope was the tacit recognition that if scientific findings ever contradicted scripture, the Bible would cease to be an authoritative source of morality and forfeit its privileged place among other social and political alternatives. But by jettisoning traditional religion for subjective revivalism, while concurrently embracing the modern conception of progress, they were left to chase after the wind of public relevance as determined by those not necessarily in tune with evangelical designs. Without tradition and hermeneutical mediation, evangelical truth claims were unwittingly subjected to the latest scientific discovery or the most fashionable social trend. Rather than shaping the culture, the culture shaped evangelicalism as the antebellum period closed. And with ever-increasing shrillness, the drone of “the Bible alone” fell on deaf ears as many 19th century Protestants witnessed their empire collapsing beneath them. The American Bible Society and its friends wanted the social stability that came with traditional religion but without

¹⁴¹ Marsden, George M. “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter?” *The Bible in America*. (86-87)

the accoutrements naturally tied to it like "liturgy, governance, theology, and instruction that are normative in a given church tradition."¹⁴²

And since all theological differences had to be exchanged for vague generalities or mission-specific objectives like Bible distribution, it is clear, as in the case of the ABS, why religious ecumenism had to give way to the socio-political variety. The best that could be hoped for was an umbrella civil religion that maintained a truce among Protestants while the collective energies and resources of evangelicals were poured into the cultural and political project all of them depended on. For the wider culture, the Bible became more symbolic than substantive, and the ABS nudged this development along by marrying the Bible to the exigencies of American life in the early republic without also supplying an interpretive scheme for how biblical principles should be enforced in the public realm. Consequently, evangelicals accelerated subjectivism and undermined the objectives sought through Christian philanthropy. Herein lays one of the great ironies of the American Bible Society: the push to place Bibles into the hands of every literate layman produced an undercurrent of individualism that exacerbated social friction, thereby weakening Protestant harmony and emboldening its secular and non-Protestant opponents. Universal Bible possession may have been the stated goal of the ABS, but it was a misleading metric in terms of measuring the extent to which Protestant hegemony could be converted into political efficacy because of the inherent subjectivism built into

¹⁴² Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. (65) Nathan Hatch writes, "People were expected to discover the self-evident message of the Bible without any mediation from creeds, theologians, or clergymen not of their own choosing. This explicit faith that biblical authority could emerge from below, from the will of the people, was the most enduring legacy of the Christian movement...Many felt the exhilarating hope that democracy had opened up an immediate access to biblical truth for all persons of good will. Americans found it difficult to realize, however, that a commitment to private judgment could drive people apart, even as it raised beyond measure their hopes for unity." (81)

the concept. While evangelicals could unanimously rally around the idea of individual possession, the question of application proved incessantly vexing. Without centralized means to channel the movement's energy, Protestant hegemony called attention to its glaring weakness and rolled out the red carpet for rational inquiry, higher criticism, and religious dissidents. But with these challenges, evangelicals did not spurn their previous notions or acknowledge the weaknesses of their positions; instead, they hastened their irrelevance by clinging even more feverishly to the right of self-interpretation and the Bible as a social panacea.

The ABS believed its efforts corrected the errors of strict rationalism as promoted by mid-century intellectuals but failed to recognize how liberal democracy's inherent complexity requires the blending and modification of republican, rational, and traditional elements—all of which are deficient as sole foundations for the body politic. Because men are not angels, reason is insufficient as a restraint against individual passion. Liberalism alone cannot replenish the moral energy needed for its survival, and though it forcefully asserts individual rights, its excesses need to be restrained in a way that does not enlarge government power. Religious faith, especially the 19th century evangelical variety based on biblicism, checked anarchical self-expression and provided cement to build a political-cultural foundation from, but its efficacy was weakened to the degree moral capital was bound up in events outside its control or too closely aligned with political benchmarks. This is not to imply that liberal democracy requires an artificial separation between state and society; it rather suggests that the rational and religious components, respectful toward the strengths and weaknesses of each, serve the cause best

when they are keenly aware of the parameters within which their talents flourish. The history of anti-intellectualism in America suggests some vulnerability in a strictly evangelical political venture, but there are times when public policy must be informed by religious ideas—especially when those issues encompass a large swath of the socio-cultural sphere. As self-described cultural custodians, evangelicals are most effective when they circle the wagons to safeguard the traditional vein of liberal democracy. Conversely, they enervate the moral energy needed in that political arrangement when they overestimate their influence and neglect the talents and perspectives of natural allies in the liberal democratic project. An “us against them” fortress-type mentality only tends to create friction and apprehension on the part of those who recognize the multidimensionality of liberal democracy. At the very time the ABS should have been using its influence to make intellectual inroads into the Unitarian and Universalist communities of the 1820’s and 1830’s, its institutional hubris eventually relegated the movement in later decades to subculture status. Compromise with “unorthodox” citizens was not unheard of for evangelicals; in fact, this is exactly what occurred in the election of 1800 when they joined with rational deists like Jefferson to bury the Federalist era and its official church establishments. The ABS’ cultural influence may have waned not because it failed to address secular philosophical challenges in mid-century with rival abstract theories but because it did not do enough train Protestant Christians on how to weave the pursuit of truth into a coherent synthesis by adapting their worldview with stratified and more nuanced levels of analysis.

This analytical exercise has important consequences for American political development, though it leaves more questions than answers. It may be easy to pillory evangelicals for their obvious excesses, but how can good citizenship be cultivated in a diverse, extended democracy without a vibrant spiritual component? Evangelicals have long played an active and invaluable role in carrying out this thankless duty despite the ridicule it invites from a democratic culture obsessed with individualism. Yes, the results have been mixed and the expectations often unreasonably high, but it is difficult to identify another large group of people (religious or otherwise) that has embodied the idea of civic-mindedness to the degree and historical consistency of American evangelicals. Would evangelical alienation from liberal democracy come with any costs, and if so, what would those be? Spiritedness is in high demand but short supply. It may be that evangelical excesses are less dangerous to our form of government than having those impulses safely sequestered into life's private sphere. The benevolent era comes alive because it was a time in which a sizeable, non-electoral public domain permitted organizations like the American Bible Society to experiment in the art of responsible citizenship. Perhaps the most important question is: How do we begin the hard work of reclaiming a meaningful federal system in which citizen groups like the ABS serve as innovative vanguards of regime maintenance instead of as subsidiary components in an ever-widening government apparatus? These are the types of questions political scientists (at least for those in the tradition of Tocqueville) need to wrestle with—not simply as historical anecdotes but enduring themes of American political development.